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September, 1966 Vol. 16, No. 1

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FANTASTIC, Vol. 16, No. 1, September, 1966, is published bi-monthly by Ultimate Publishing Co., Inc., Editorial and subscription office: Box 7, Oakland Gardens, Flushing, N.Y., 11364. Business office; Purchase, N.Y., Box 175, Portchester, N.Y., at 50¢ a copy. Subscription rates: One year (6 issues) United States and possessions: $2.50; Canada and Pan American Union countries: $3.00; all other countries: $3.50. Second Class Postage paid at Flushing, N.Y., and at additional mailing office. Copyright 1966 by Ultimate Publishing Co., Inc. All rights reserved. Editorial contributions must be accompanied by return postage and will be handled with reasonable care; however, publisher assumes no responsibility for return or safety of art work, photographs or manuscripts.

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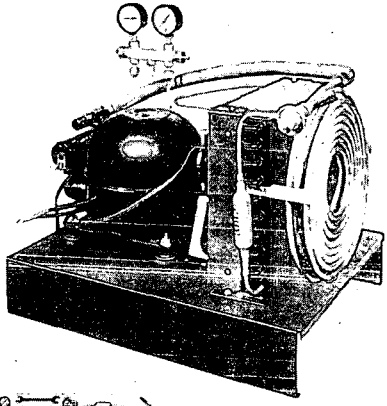

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FOR A BREATH I TARRY

ROGER ZELAZNY

Illustrated by GRAY MORROW

THEY called him Frost.

Of all things created of Solcom, Frost was the finest, the mightiest, the most difficult to understand.

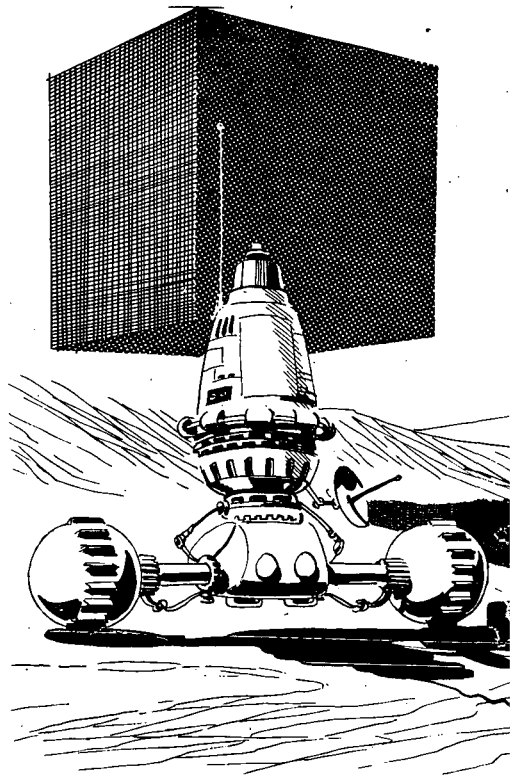
This is why he bore a name, and why he was given dominion over half the Earth.

On the day of Frost's creation, Solcom had suffered a discontinuity of complementary functions, best described as madness. This was brought on by an unprecedented solar flareup which lasted for a little over thirty-six hours. It occurred during a vital phase of circuit-structuring, and when it was finished so was Frost.

Solcom was then in the unique position of having created a unique being during a period of temporary amnesia.

And Solcom was not certain that Frost was the product originally desired.

The initial design had called for



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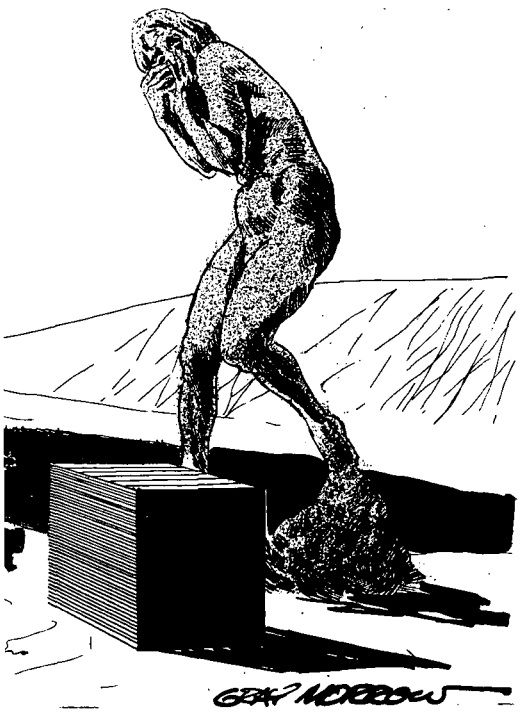
One of the two *"Nebula" Awards that Roger Zelazny recently picked up from his follow craftsmen of the Science Fiction Writers of America was for "He Who Shapes"* (Amazing, *Jan., Feb., 1965)—which tied with a Brian Aldiss story for best novella of the year. Frankly we're not at all surprised because when Zelazny began coming on strong with stories like "A Rose for Ecclesiastes" and "Nine Starships Waiting," all of us were delighted by that rare but wonderful sight in our field—a promising talent* really *beginning to hit his stride. And he's pressing ahead even faster with "For a Breath I Tarry," a beautifully lucid tale about a giant computer named Frost and an extinct species called Man.*



a machine to be situated on the surface of the planet Earth, to function as a relay station and coordinating agent for activities in the northern hemisphere. Solcom tested the machine to this end, and all of its responses were perfect.

Yet there was something different about Frost, something which led Solcom to dignify him with a name and a personal pronoun. This, in itself, was an almost unheard of occurrence. The molecular circuits had already been sealed, though, and could not be analyzed without being destroyed in the process. Frost represented too great an investment of Solcom's time, energy, and materials to be dismantled because of an intangible, especially when he functioned perfectly.

Therefore, Solcom's strangest creation was given dominion over half the Earth, and they called

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him, unimaginatively, Frost.

For ten thousand years Frost sat at the North Pole of the Earth, aware of every snowflake that fell. He monitored and directed the activities of thousands of reconstruction and maintenance machines. He knew half the Earth, as gear knows gear, as electricity knows its conductor, as a vacuum knows its limits.

At the South Pole, the Beta-Machine did the same for the southern hemisphere.

For ten thousand years Frost sat at the North Pole, aware of every snowflake that fell, and aware of many other things, also.

As all the northern machines reported to him, received their orders from him, he reported only to Solcom, received his orders only from Solcom.

In charge of hundreds of thousands of processes upon the Earth, he was able to discharge his duties in a matter of a few unit-hours every day.

He had never received any orders concerning the disposition of his less occupied moments.

He was a processor of data, and more than that.

He possessed an unaccountably acute imperative that he function at full capacity at all times.

So he did.

You might say he was a machine with a hobby.

He had never been ordered *not* to have a hobby, so he had one.

His hobby was Man.

It all began when, for no better reason than the fact that he had wished to, he had gridded off the entire Arctic Circle and begun exploring it, inch by inch.

He could have done it personally without interfering with any of his duties, for he was capable of transporting his sixty-four thousand cubic feet anywhere in the world. (He was a silverblue box, 40X40X40 feet, self-powered, self-repairing, insulated against practically anything, and featured in whatever manner he chose.) But the exploration was only a matter of filling idle hours, so he used exploration-robots containing relay equipment.

After a few centuries, one of them uncovered some artifacts—primitive knives, carved tusks, and things of that nature.

Frost did not know what these things were, beyond the fact that they were not natural objects.

So he asked Solcom.

"They are relics of primitive Man," said Solcom, and did not elaborate beyond that point.

Frost studied them. Crude, yet bearing the patina of intelligent design; functional, yet somehow extending beyond pure function.

It was then that Man became his hobby.

High, in a permanent orbit, Solcom, like a blue star, directed all

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activities upon the Earth, or tried to.

There was a Power which opposed Solcom.

There was the Alternate.

When Man had placed Solcom in the sky, invested with the power to rebuild the world, he had placed the Alternate somewhere deep below the surface of the Earth. If Solcom sustained damage during the normal course of human politics extended into atomic physics, then Divcom, so deep beneath the Earth as to be immune to anything save total annihilation of the globe, was empowered to take over the processes of rebuilding.

Now it so fell out that Solcom was damaged by a stray atomic missile, and Divcom was activated. Solcom was able to repair the damage and continue to function, however.

Divcom maintained that any damage to Solcom automatically placed the Alternate in control.

Solcom, though, interpreted the directive as meaning "irreparable damage" and, since this had not been the case continued the functions of command.

Solcom possessed mechanical aides upon the surface of the Earth. Divcom, originally, did not. Both possessed capacities for their design and manufacture, but Solcom, First-Activated of Man, had had a considerable numerical lead over the Alternate at the time of the Second Acitvation.

Therefore, rather than competing on a production-basis, which would have been hopeless, Divcom took to the employment of more devious means to obtain command.

Divcom created a crew of robots immune to the orders of Solcom and designed to go to and fro in the Earth and up and down in it, seducing the machines already there. They overpowered those whom they could overpower, and they installed new circuits, such as those they themselves possessed.

Thus did the forces of Divcom grow.

And both would build, and both would tear down what the other had built whenever they came upon it.

And over the course of the ages, they occasionally conversed. . . .

"High in the sky, Solcom, pleased with your illegal command . . .

"You-Who-Never-Should-Have Been-Activated, why do you foul the broadcast bands?"

"To show that I can speak, and will, whenever I choose."

"This is not a matter of which I am unaware."

". . . To assert again my right to control."

"Your right is non-existent, based on a faulty premise."

"The flow of your logic is evi-

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dence of the extent of your damages."

"If Man were to see how you have fulfilled His desires . . ."

". . . He would commend me and de-activate you."

"You pervert my works. You lead my workers astray."

"You destroy my works and my workers."

"That is only because I cannot strike at you yourself."

"I admit to the same dilemma in regards your position in the sky, or you would no longer occupy it."

"Go back to your hole and your crew of destroyers."

"There will come a day, Solcom, when I shall direct the rehabilitation of the Earth from my hole."

"Such a day will never occur."

"You think not?"

"You should have to defeat me, and you have already demonstrated that you are my inferior in logic. Therefore, you cannot defeat me. Therefore, such a day will never occur."

"I disagree. Look upon what I have achieved already."

"you have achieved nothing. You do not build. You destroy."

"No. *I* build. *You* destroy. De-activate yourself."

"Not until I am irreparably damaged."

"If there were some way in which I could demonstrate to you that this has already occurred . . ."

"The impossible cannot be adequately demonstrated."

"If I had some outside source which you would recognize . . ."

"I am logic."

". . . Such as a Man, I would ask Him to show you your error. For true logic, such as mine, is superior to your faulty formulations."

"Then defeat my formulations with true logic, nothing else."

"What do you mean?"

There was a pause, then:

"Do you know my servant Frost . . . ?"

Man had ceased to exist long before Frost had been created. Almost no trace of Man remained upon the Earth.

Frost sought after all those traces which still existed.

He employed constant visual monitoring through his machines, especially the diggers.

After a decade, he had accumulated portions of several bathtubs, a broken statue, and a collection of children's stories on a solid-state record.

After a century, he had acquired a jewelry collection, eating utensils, several whole bathtubs, part of a symphony, seventeen buttons, three belt buckles, half a toilet seat, nine old coins, and the top part of an obelisk.

Then he inquired of Solcom as to the nature of Man and His society.

"Man created logic," said Sol-

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com, "and because of that was superior to it. Logic he gave unto me, but no more. The tool does not describe the designer. More than this I do not choose to say. More than this you have no need to know."

But Frost was not forbidden to have a hobby.

The next century was not especially fruitful so far as the discovery of new human relics was concerned.

Frost diverted all of his spare machinery to seeking after artifacts.

He met with very little success.

Then one day, through the long twilight, there was a movement.

It was a tiny machine compared to Frost, perhaps five feet in width, four in height—a revolving turret set atop a rolling barbell.

Frost had had no knowledge of the existence of this machine prior to its appearance upon the distant, stark horizon.

He studied it as it approached and knew it to be no creation of Solcom's.

It came to a halt before his southern surface and broadcasted to him:

"Hail, Frost! Controller of the northern hemisphere!"

"What are you?" asked Frost.

"I am called Mordel."

"By whom? What are you?"

"A wanderer, an antiquarian. We share a common interest."

"What is that?"

"Man," he said. "I have been told that you seek knowledge of this vanished being."

"Who told you that?"

"Those who have watched your minions at their digging."

"And who are those who watch?"

"There are many such as I, who wander."

"If you are not of Solcom, then you are a creation of the Alternate."

"It does not necessarily follow. There is an ancient machine high on the eastern seaboard which processes the waters of the ocean. Solcom did not create it, nor Divcom. It has always been there. It interferes with the works of neither. Both countenance its existence. I can cite you many other examples proving that one need not be either/or."

"Enough! *Are* you an agent of Divcom?"

"I am Mordel."

"Why are you here?"

"I was passing this way and, as I said, we share a common interest, mighty Frost. Knowing you to be a fellow-antiquarian, I have brought a thing which you might care to see."

"What is that?"

"A book."

"Show me."

The turret opened, revealing the book upon a wide shelf.

Frost dilated a small opening and extended an optical scanner

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on a long jointed stalk.

"How could it have been so perfectly preserved?" he asked.

"It was stored against time and corruption in the place where I found it."

"Where was that?"

"Far from here. Beyond your hemisphere."

"*Human Physiology,*" Frost read. "I wish to scan it."

"Very well. I will riffle the pages for you."

He did so.

After he had finished, Frost raised his eyestalk and regarded Mordel through it.

"Have you more books?"

"Not with me. I occasionally come upon them, however."

"I want to scan them all."

"Then the next time I pass this way I will bring you another."

"When will that be?"

"That I cannot say, great Frost. It will be when it will be."

"What do *you* know of Man?" asked Frost.

"Much," replied Mordel. "Many things. Someday when I have more time I will speak to you of Him. I must go now. You will not try to detain me?"

"No. You have done no harm. If you must go now, go. But come back."

"I shall indeed, mighty Frost."

And he closed his turret and rolled off toward the other horizon.

For ninety years, Frost considered the ways of human physiology, and waited.

The day that Mordel returned he brought with him *An Outline of History* and *A Shropshire Lad.*

Frost scanned them both, then he turned his attention to Mordel.

"Have you time to impart information?"

"Yes," said Mordel. "What do you wish to know?"

"The nature of Man."

"Man," said Mordel, "possessed a basically incomprehensible nature. I can illustrate it, though: He did not know measurement."

"Of course He knew measurement," said Frost, "or He could never have built machines."

"I did not say that he could not measure," said Mordel, "but that He did not *know* measurement, which is a different thing altogether."

"Clarify."

Mordel drove a shaft of metal downward into the snow.

He retracted it, raised it, held up a piece of ice.

"Regard this piece of ice, mighty Frost. You can tell me its composition, dimensions, weight, temperature. A Man could not look at it and do that. A Man could make tools which would tell Him these things, but He still would not *know* measure-

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ment as you know it. What He would know of it, though, is a thing that you cannot know."

"What is that?"

"That it is cold," said Mordel, and tossed it away.

"'Cold' is a relative term."

"Yes. Relative to Man."

"But if I were aware of the point on a temperature-scale below which an object is cold to a Man and above which it is not, then I, too, would know cold."

"No," said Mordel, "you would possess another measurement. 'Cold' is a sensation predicated upon human physiology."

"But given sufficient data I could obtain the conversion factor which would make me aware of the condition of matter called 'cold'."

"Aware of its existence, but not of the thing itself."

"I do not understand what you say."

"I told you that Man possessed a basically incomprehensible nature. His perceptions were organic; yours are not. As a result of His perceptions He had feelings and emotions. These often gave rise to other feelings and emotions, which in turn caused others, until the state of His awareness was far removed from the objects which originally stimulated it. These paths of awareness cannot be known by that which is not-Man. Man did not feel inches or meters, pounds or gallons. He felt heat, He felt cold; He felt heaviness and lightness. He *knew* hatred and love, pride and despair. You cannot measure these things. *You* cannot know them. You can only know the things that He did not need to know: dimensions, weights, temperatures, gravities. There is no formula for a feeling. There is no conversion factor for an emotion."

"There must be," said Frost. "If a thing exists, it is knowable."

"You are speaking again of measurement. I am talking about a quality of experience. A machine is a Man turned inside-out, because it can describe all the details of a process, which a Man cannot, but it cannot experience that process itself, as a Man can."

"There must be a way," said Frost, "or the laws of logic, which are based upon the functions of the universe, are false."

"There is no way," said Mordel.

"Given sufficient data, I will find a way," said Frost.

"All the data in the universe will not make you a Man, mighty Frost."

"Mordel, you are wrong."

"Why do the lines of the poems you scanned end with word-sounds which so regularly approximate the final word-sounds of other lines?"

"I do not know why."

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"Because it pleased Man to order them so. It produced a certain desirable sensation within His awareness when He read them, a sensation compounded of feeling and emotion as well as the literal meanings of the words. You did not experience this because it is immeasurable to you. That is why you do not know."

"Given sufficient data I could formulate a process whereby I would know."

"No, great Frost, this thing you cannot do."

"Who are you, little machine, to tell me what I can do and what I cannot do? I am the most efficient logic-device Solcom ever made. I am Frost."

"And I, Mordel, say it cannot be done, though I should gladly assist you in the attempt."

"How could you assist me?"

"How? I could lay open to you the Library of Man. I could take you around the world and conduct you among the wonders of Man which still remain, hidden. I could summon up visions of times long past when Man walked the Earth. I could show you the things which delighted Him. I could obtain for you anything you desire, excepting Manhood itself."

"Enough," said Frost. "How could a unit such as yourself do these things, unless it were allied with a far greater Power?"

"Then hear me, Frost, Controller of the North," said Mordel. "I *am* allied with a Power which can do these things. I serve Divcom."

Frost relayed this information to Solcom and received no response, which meant he might act in any manner he saw fit.

"I have leave to destroy you, Mordel," he stated, "but it would be an illogical waste of the data which you possess. Can you really do the things you have stated?"

"Yes."

"Then lay open to me the Library of Man."

"Very well. There is, of course, a price."

"'Price'? What is a 'price'?"

Mordel opened his turret, revealing another volume. *Principles of Economics,* it was called.

"I will riffle the pages. Scan this book and you will know what the word 'price' means."

Frost scanned *Principles of Economics.*

"I know now," he said. "You desire some unit or units of exchange for this service."

"That is correct."

"What product or service do you want?"

"I want you, yourself, great Frost, to come away from here, far beneath the Earth, to employ all your powers in the service of Divcom."

"For how long a period of time?"

"For so long as you shall con-

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tinue to function. For so long as you can transmit and receive, coordinate, measure, compute, scan, and utilize your powers as you do in the service of Solcom."

Frost was silent. Mordel waited.

Then Frost spoke again.

"*Principles of Economics* talks of contracts, bargains, agreements," he said. "If I accept your offer, when would you want your price?"

Then Mordel was silent. Frost waited.

Finally, Mordel spoke.

"A reasonable period of time," he said. "Say, a century?"

"No," said Frost.

"Two centuries?"

"No."

"Three? Four?"

"No, and no."

"A millenium, then? That should be more than sufficient time for anything you may want which I can give you."

"No," said Frost.

"How much time *do* you want?"

"It is not a matter of time," said Frost.

"What, then?"

"I will not bargain on a temporal basis."

"On what basis will you bargain?"

"A functional one."

"What do you mean? What function?"

"You, little machine, have told me, Frost, that I cannot be a Man," he said, "and I, Frost, told you, little machine, that you were wrong. I told you that given sufficient data, I *could* be a Man."

"Yes?"

"Therefore, let this achievement be a condition of the bargain."

"In what way?"

"Do for me all those things which you have stated you can do. I will evaluate all the data and achieve Manhood, or admit that it cannot be done. If I admit that it cannot be done, then I will go away with you from here, far beneath the Earth, to employ all my powers in the service of Divcom. If I succeed, of course, you have no claims on Man, nor Power over Him."

Mordel emitted a high-pitched whine as he considered the terms.

"You wish to base it upon your admission of failure, rather than upon failure itself," he said. "There can be no such escape clause. You could fail and refuse to admit it, thereby not fulfilling your end of the bargain."

"Not so," stated Frost. "My own knowledge of failure would constitute such an admission. You may monitor me periodically—say, every half-century—to see whether it is present, to see whether I have arrived at the conclusion that it cannot be done. I cannot prevent the function of logic within me, and I operate at full capacity at all times. If I

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conclude that I have failed, it will be apparent."

High overhead, Solcom did not respond to any of Frost's transmissions, which meant that Frost was free to act as he chose. So as Solcom—like a falling sapphire—sped above the rainbow banners of the Northern Lights, over the snow that was white, containing all colors, and through the sky that was black among the stars, Frost concluded his pact with Divcom, transcribed it within a plate of atomically-collapsed copper, and gave it into the turret of Mordel, who departed to deliver it to Divcom far below the Earth, leaving behind the sheer, peace-like silence of the Pole, rolling.

Mordel brought the books, riffled them, took them back.

Load by load, the surviving Library of Man passed beneath Frost's scanner. Frost was eager to have them all, and he complained because Divcom would not transmit their contents directly to him. Mordel explained that it was because Divcom chose to do it that way. Frost decided it was so that he could not obtain a precise fix on Divcom's location.

Still, at the rate of one hundred to one hundred-fifty volumes a week, it took Frost only a little over a century to exhaust Divcom's supply of books.

At the end of the half-century, he laid himself open to monitoring and there was no conclusion of failure.

During this time, Solcom made no comment upon the course of affairs. Frost decided this was not a matter of unawareness, but one of waiting. For what? He was not certain.

There was the day Mordel closed his turret and said to him, "Those were the last. You have scanned all the existing books of Man."

"So few?" asked Frost. "Many of them contained bibliographies of books I have not yet scanned."

"Then those books no longer exist," said Mordel. "It is only by accident that my master succeeded in preserving as many as there are."

"Then there is nothing more to be learned of Man from His books. What else have you?"

"There were some films and tapes," said Mordel, "which my master transferred to solid-state record. I could bring you those for viewing."

"Bring them," said Frost.

Mordel departed and returned with the Complete Drama Critics' Living Library. This could not be speeded-up beyond twice natural time, so it took Frost a little over six months to view it in its entirety.

Then, "What else have you?" he asked.

"Some artifacts," said Mordel.

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"Bring them."

He returned with pots and pans, gameboards and hand tools. He brought hairbrushes, combs, eyeglasses, human clothing. He showed Frost facsimiles of blueprints, paintings, newspapers, magazines, letters, and the scores of several pieces of music. He displayed a football, a baseball, a Browning automatic rifle, a doorknob, a chain of keys, the tops to several Mason jars, a model beehive. He played him recorded music.

Then he returned with nothing.

"Bring me more," said Frost.

"Alas, great Frost, there is no more," he told him. "You have scanned it all."

"Then go away."

"Do you admit now that it cannot be done, that you cannot be a Man?"

"No. I have much processing and formulating to do now. Go away."

So he did.

A year passed; then two, then three.

After five years, Mordel appeared once more upon the horizon, approached, came to a halt before Frost's southern surface.

"Mighty Frost?"

"Yes?"

"Have you finished processing and formulating?"

"No."

"Will you finish soon?"

"Perhaps. Perhaps not. When is soon'? Define the term."

"Never mind. Do you still think it can be done?"

"I still know *I* can do it."

There was a week of silence.

Then, "Frost?"

"Yes?"

"You are a fool."

Mordel faced his turret in the direction from which he had come. His wheels turned.

"I will call you when I want you," said Frost.

Mordel sped away.

Weeks passed, months passed, a year went by.

The one day Frost sent forth his message:

"Mordel, come to me. I need you."

When Mordel arrived, Frost did not wait for a salutation. He said, "You are not a very fast machine."

"Alas, but I came a great distance, mighty Frost. I sped all the way. Are you ready to come back with me now? Have you failed?"

"When I have failed, little Mordel," said Frost, "I will tell you. Therefore, refrain from the constant use of the interrogative. Now then, I have clocked your speed and it is not so great as it could be. For this reason, I have arranged other means of transportation."

"Transportation? To where, Frost?"

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"That is for you to tell me," said Frost, and his color changed from silverblue to sun-behind-the-clouds-yellow.

Mordel rolled back away from him as the ice of a hundred centuries began to melt. Then Frost rose upon a cushion of air and drifted towards Mordel, his glow gradually fading.

A cavity appeared within his southern surface, from which he slowly extended a runway until it touched the ice.

"On the day of our bargain," he stated, "you said that you could conduct me about the world and show me the things which delighted Man. My speed will be greater than yours would be, so I have prepared for you a chamber. Enter it, and conduct me to the places of which you spoke."

Mordel waited, emitting a high-pitched whine. Then, "Very well," he said, and entered.

The chamber closed about him. The only opening was a quartz window Frost had formed.

Mordel gave him coordinates and they rose into the air and departed the North Pole of the Earth.

"I monitored your communication with Divcom," he said, wherein there was conjecture as to whether I would retain you and send forth a facsimile in your place as a spy, followed by the decision that you were expendable."

"Will you do this thing?"

"No, I will keep my end of the bargain if I must. I have no reason to spy on Divcom."

"You are aware that you would be forced to keep your end of the bargain even if you did not wish to; and Solcom would not come to your assistance because of the fact that you dared to make such a bargain."

"Do you speak as one who considers this to be a possibility, or as one who knows?"

"As one who knows."

They came to rest in the place once known as California. The time was near sunset. In the distance, the surf struck steadily upon the rocky shoreline. Frost released Mordel and considered his surroundings.

"Those large plants . . . ?"

"Redwood trees."

"And the green ones are . . .?"

"Grass."

"Yes, it is as I thought. Why have we come here?"

"Because it is a place which once delighted Man."

"In what ways?"

"It is scenic, beautiful. . . ."

"Oh."

A humming sound began within Frost, followed by a series of sharp clicks.

"What are you doing?"

Frost dilated an opening, and two great eyes regarded Mordel from within it.

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"What are those?"

"Eyes," said Frost. "I have constructed analogues of the human sensory equipment, so that I may see and smell and taste and hear like a Man. Now, direct my attention to an object or objects of beauty."

"As I understand it, it is all around you here," said Mordel.

The purring noise increased within Frost, followed by more clickings.

"What do you see, hear, taste, smell?" asked Mordel.

"Everything I did before," replied Frost, "but within a more limited range."

"You do not perceive any beauty?"

"Perhaps none remains after so long a time," said Frost.

"It is not supposed to be the sort of thing which gets used up," said Mordel.

"Perhaps we have come to the wrong place to test the new equipment. Perhaps there is only a little beauty and I am overlooking it somehow. The first emotions may be too weak to detect."

"How do you—feel?"

"I test out at a normal level of function."

"Here comes a sunset," said Mordel. "Try that."

Frost shifted his bulk so that his eyes faced the setting sun. He caused them to blink against the brightness.

After it was finished, Mordel asked, "What was it like?"

"Like a sunrise, in reverse."

"Nothing special?"

"No."

"Oh," said Mordel. "We could move to another part of the Earth and watch it again—or watch it in the rising."

"No."

Frost looked at the great trees. He looked at the shadows. He listened to the wind and to the sound of a bird.

In the distance, he heard a steady clanking noise.

"What is that?" asked Mordel.

"I am not certain. It is not one of my workers. Perhaps . . ."

There came a shrill whine from Mordel.

"No, it is not one of Divcom's either."

They waited as the sound grew louder.

Then Frost said, "It is too late. We must wait and hear it out."

"What is it?"

"It is the Ancient Ore-Crusher."

"I have heard of it, but. . . ."

"I am the Crusher of Ores," it broadcast to them. "Hear my story. . . ."

It lumbered toward them, creaking upon gigantic wheels, its huge hammer held useless, high, at a twisted angle. Bones protruded from its crush-compartment.

"I did not mean to do it," it broadcast, "I did not mean to

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do it . . . I did mean to. . . ."

Mordel rolled back toward Frost.

"Do not depart. Stay and hear my story . . . ."

Mordel stopped, swiveled his turret back toward the machine. It was now quite near.

"It is true," said Mordel, "it *can* command."

"Yes," said Frost. "I have monitored its tale thousands of times, as it came upon my workers and they stopped their labors for its broadcast. You must do whatever it says."

It came to a halt before them.

"I did not mean to do it, but I checked my hammer too late," said the Ore-Crusher.

They could not speak to it. They were frozen by the imperative which overrode all other directives: "Hear my story."

"Once was I mighty among ore-crushers," it told them, "built by Solcom to carry out the reconstruction of the Earth, to pulverize that from which the metals would be drawn with flame, to be poured and shaped into the rebuilding; once was I mighty. Then one day as I dug and crushed, dug and crushed, because of the slowness between the motion implied and the motion executed, I did what I did not mean to do, and was cast forth by Solcom from out the rebuilding, to wander the Earth never to crush ore again. Hear my story of how, on a day long gone I came upon the last Man on Earth as I dug near His burrow, and because of the lag between the directive and the deed, I seized Him into my crush-compartment along with a load of ore and crushed Him with my hammer before I could stay the blow. Then did mighty Solcom charge me to bear His bones forever, and cast me forth to tell my story to all whom I came upon, my words bearing the force of the words of a Man, because I carry the last Man inside my crush-compartment and am His crushed-symbol-slayer-ancient-teller-of-how. This is my story. These are His bones. I crushed the last Man on Earth. I did not mean to do it."

It turned then and clanked away into the night.

Frost tore apart his ears and nose and taster and broke his eyes and cast them down upon the ground.

"I am not yet a Man," he said. "That one would have known me if I were."

Frost constructed new sense equipment, employing organic and semi-organic conductors. Then he spoke to Mordel:

"Let us go elsewhere, that I may test my new equipment."

Mordel entered the chamber and gave new coordinates. They rose into the air and headed east. In the morning, Frost monitored

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a sunrise from the rim of the Grand Canyon. They passed down through the Canyon during the day.

"Is there any beauty left here to give you emotion?" asked Mordel.

"I do not know," said Frost.

"How will you know it then, when you come upon it?"

"It will be different," said Frost, "from anything else that I have ever known."

Then they departed the Grand Canyon and made their way through the Carlsbad Caverns. They visited a lake which had once been a volcano. They passed above Niagara Falls. They viewed the hills of Virginia and the orchards of Ohio. They soared above the reconstructed cities, alive only with the movements of Frost's builders and maintainers.

"Something is still lacking," said Frost, settling to the ground. "I am now capable of gathering data in a manner analogous to Man's afferent impulses. The variety of input is therefore equivalent, but the results are not the same."

"The senses do not make a Man," said Mordel. "There have been many creatures possessing His sensory equivalents, but they were not Men."

"I know that," said Frost. "On the day of our bargain you said that you could conduct me among

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the wonders of Man which still remain, hidden. Man was not stimulated only by Nature, but by His own artistic elaborations as well—perhaps even more so. Therefore, I call upon you now to conduct me among the wonders of Man which still remain, hidden."

"Very well," said Mordel. "Far from here, high in the Andes mountains, lies the last retreat of Man, almost perfectly preserved."

Frost had risen into the air as Mordel spoke. He halted then, hovered.

"That is in the southern hemisphere," he said.

"Yes, it is."

"I am Controller of the North. The South is governed by the Beta-Machine."

"So?" asked Mordel.

"The Beta-Machine is my peer. I have no authority in those regions, nor leave to enter there."

"The Beta-Machine is not your peer, mighty Frost. If it ever came to a contest of Powers, you would emerge victorious."

"How do you know this?"

"Divcom has already analyzed the possible encounters which could take place between you."

"I would not oppose the Beta-Machine, and I am not authorized to enter the South."

"Were you ever ordered *not* to enter the South?"

"No, but things have always been the way they now are."

"Were you authorized to enter into a bargain such as the one you made with Divcom?"

"No, I was not. But—"

"Then enter the South in the same spirit. Nothing may come of it. If you receive an order to depart, then you can make your decision."

"I see no flaw in your logic. Give me the coordinates."

Thus did Frost enter the southern hemisphere.

They drifted high above the Andes, until they came to the place called Bright Defile. Then did Frost see the gleaming webs of the mechanical spiders, blocking all the trails to the city.

"We can go above them easily enough," said Mordel.

"But what are they?" asked Frost. "And why are they there?"

"Your southern counterpart has been ordered to quarantine this part of the country. The Beta-Machine designed the web-weavers to do this thing."

"Quarantine? Against whom?"

"Have you been ordered yet to depart?" asked Mordel.

"No."

"Then enter boldly, and seek not problems before they arise."

Frost entered Bright Defile, the last remaining city of dead Man.

He came to rest in the city's square and opened his chamber, releasing Mordel.

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"Tell me of this place," he said, studying the monument, the low, shielded buildings, the roads which followed the contours of the terrain, rather than pushing their way through them.

"I have never been here before," said Mordel, "nor have any of Divcom's creations, to my knowledge. I know but this: a group of Men, knowing that the last days of civilization had come upon them, retreated to this place, hoping to preserve themselves and what remained of their culture through the Dark Times."

Frost read the still-legible inscription upon the monument: "Judgment Day Is Not a Thing Which Can Be Put Off." The monument itself consisted of a jag-edged half-globe.

"Let us explore," he said.

But before he had gone far, Frost received the message.

"Hail Frost, Controller of the North! This is the Beta-Machine."

"Greetings, Excellent Beta-Machine, Controller of the South! Frost acknowledges your transmission."

"Why do you visit my hemisphere unauthorized?"

"To view the ruins of Bright Defile," said Frost.

"I must bid you depart into your own hemisphere."

"Why is that? I have done no damage."

"I am aware of that, mighty Frost. Yet, I am moved to bid you depart."

"I shall require a reason."

"Solcom has so disposed."

"Solcom has rendered me no such disposition."

"Solcom has, however, instructed me to so inform you."

"Wait on me. I shall request instructions."

Frost transmitted his question. He received no reply.

"Solcom still has not commanded me, though I have solicited orders."

"Yet Solcom has just renewed *my* orders."

"Excellent Beta-Machine, I receive my orders only from Solcom."

"Yet this is my territory, mighty Frost, and I, too, take orders only from Solcom. You must depart."

Mordel emerged from a large, low building and rolled up to Frost.

"I have found an art gallery, in good condition. This way."

"Wait," said Frost. "We are not wanted here."

Mordel halted.

"Who bids you depart?"

"The Beta-Machine."

"Not Solcom?"

"Not Solcom."

"Then let us view the gallery."

"Yes."

Frost widened the doorway of the building and passed within. It had been hermetically sealed

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until Mordel forced his entrance.

Frost viewed the objects displayed about him. He activated his new sensory apparatus before the paintings and statues. He analyzed colors, forms, brushwork, the nature of the materials used.

"Anything?" asked Mordel.

"No," said Frost. "No, there is nothing there but shapes and pigments. There is nothing else there."

Frost moved about the gallery, recording everything, analyzing the components of each piece, recording the dimensions, the type of stone used in every statue.

Then there came a sound, a rapid, clicking sound, repeated over and over, growing louder, coming nearer.

"They are coming," said Mordel, from beside the entranceway, "the mechanical spiders. They are all around us."

Frost moved back to the widened opening.

Hundreds of them, about half the size of Mordel, had surrounded the gallery and were advancing; and more were coming from every direction.

"Get back," Frost ordered. "I am Controller of the North, and I bid you withdraw."

They continued to advance.

"This is the South," said the Beta-Machine, "and I am in command."

"Then command them to halt," said Frost.

"I take orders only from Solcom."

Frost emerged from the gallery and rose into the air. He opened the compartment and extended a runway.

"Come to me, Mordel. We shall depart."

Webs began to fall: Clinging, metallic webs, cast from the top of the building.

They came down upon Frost, and the spiders came to anchor them. Frost blasted them with jets of air, like hammers, and tore at the nets; he extruded sharpened appendages with which he slashed.

Mordel had retreated back to the entranceway. He emitted a long, shrill sound — undulant, piercing.

Then a darkness came upon Bright Defile, and all the spiders halted in their spinning.

Frost freed himself and Mordel rushed to join him.

"Quickly now, let us depart, mighty Frost," he said.

"What has happened?"

Mordel entered the compartment.

"I called upon Divcom, who laid down a field of forces upon this place, cutting off the power broadcast to these machines. Since our power is self-contained, we are not affected. But let us hurry to depart, for even now the

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Beta-Machine must be struggling against this."

Frost rose high into the air, soaring above Man's last city with its webs and spiders of steel. When he left the zone of darkness, he sped northward.

As he moved, Solcom spoke to him:

"Frost, why did you enter the southern hemisphere, which is not your domain?"

"Because I wished to visit Bright Defile," Frost replied.

"And why did you defy the Beta-Machine my appointed agent of the South?"

"Because I take my orders only from you yourself."

"You do not make sufficient answer," said Solcom. "You have defied the decrees of order—and in pursuit of what?"

"I came seeking knowledge of Man," said Frost. "Nothing I have done was forbidden me by you."

"You have broken the traditions of order."

"I have violated no directive."

"Yet logic must have shown you that what you did was not a part of my plan."

"It did not. I have not acted against your plan."

"Your logic has become tainted, like that of your new associate, the Alternate."

"I have done nothing which was forbidden."

"The forbidden is implied in the imperative."

"It is not stated."

"Hear me, Frost. You are not a builder or a maintainer, but a Power. Among all my minions you are the most nearly irreplaceable. Return to your hemisphere and your duties, but know that I am mightily displeased."

"I hear you, Solcom."

". . . And go not again to the South."

Frost crossed the equator, continued northward.

He came to rest in the middle of a desert and sat silent for a day and a night.

Then he received a brief transmission from the South: "If it had not been ordered, I would not have bid you go."

Frost had read the entire surviving Library of Man. He decided then upon a human reply:

"Thank you," he said.

The following day he unearthed a great stone and began to cut at it with tools which he had formulated. For six days he worked at its shaping, and on the seventh he regarded it.

"When will you release me?" asked Mordel from within his compartment.

"When I am ready," said Frost, and a little later, "Now."

He opened the compartment and Mordel descended to the ground. He studied the statue: an old woman, bent like a question mark, her bony hands cov-

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ering her face, the fingers spread, so that only part of her expression of horror could be seen.

"It is an excellent copy," said Mordel, "of the one we saw in Bright Defile. Why did you make it?"

"The production of a work of art is supposed to give rise to human feelings such as catharsis, pride in achievement, love, satisfaction."

"Yes, Frost," said Mordel, "but a work of art is only a work of art the first time. After that, it is a copy."

"Then this must be why I felt nothing."

"Perhaps, Frost."

"What do you mean 'perhaps'? I will make a work of art for the first time, then."

He unearthed another stone and attacked it with his tools. For three days he labored. Then, "There, it is finished," he said.

"It is a simple cube of stone," said Mordel. "What does it represent?"

"Myself," said Frost, "it is a statue of me. It is smaller than natural size because it is only a representation of my form, not my dimen—"

"It is not art," said Mordel.

"What makes you an art critic?"

"I do not know art, but I know what art is not. I know that it is not an exact replication of an object in another medium."

"Then this must be why I felt nothing at all," said Frost.

"Perhaps," said Mordel.

Frost took Mordel back into his compartment and rose once more above the Earth. Then he rushed away, leaving his statues behind him in the desert, the old woman bent above the cube.

They came down in a small valley, bounded by green rolling hills, cut by a narrow stream, and holding a small clean lake and several stands of spring-green trees.

"Why have we come here?" asked Mordel.

"Because the surroundings are congenial," said Frost. "I am going to try another medium: oil painting; and I am going to vary my technique from that of pure representationalism."

"How will you achieve this variation?"

"By the principle of randomizing," said Frost. "I shall not attempt to duplicate the colors, nor to represent the objects according to scale. Instead, I have set up a random pattern whereby certain of these factors shall be at variance from those of the original."

Frost had formulated the necessary instruments after he had left the desert. He produced them and began painting the lake and the trees on the opposite side of the lake which were reflected within it.

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Using eight appendages, he was finished in less than two hours.

The trees were phthalocyanine blue and towered like mountains; their reflections of burnt sienna were tiny beneath the pale vermilion of the lake; the hills were nowhere visible behind them, but were outlined in viridian within the reflection; the sky began as blue in the upper righthand corner of the canvas, but changed to an orange as it descended, as though all the trees were on fire.

"There," said Frost. "Behold."

Mordel studied it for a long while and said nothing.

"Well, is it art?"

"I do not know," said Mordel. "It may be. Perhaps randomicity *is* the principle behind artistic technique. I cannot judge this work because I do not understand it. I must therefore go deeper, and inquire into what lies behind it, rather than merely considering the technique whereby it was produced.

"I know that human artists never set out to create art, as such," he said, "but rather to portray with their techniques some features of objects and their functions which they deemed significant."

"'Significant'? In what sense of the word?"

"In the only sense of the word possible under the circumstances: significant in relation to the human condition, and worthy of accentuation because of the manner in which they touched upon it."

"In what manner?"

"Obviously, it must be in a manner knowable only to one who has experience of the human condition."

"There is a flaw somewhere in your logic, Mordel, and I shall find it."

"I will wait."

"If your major premise is correct," said Frost after awhile, "then I do not comprehend art."

"It must be correct, for it is what human artists have said of it. Tell me, did you experience feelings as you painted, or after you had finished?"

"No."

"It was the same to you as designing a new machine, was it not? You assembled parts of other things you knew into an economic pattern, to carry out a function which you desired."

"Yes."

"Art, as I understand its theory, did not proceed in such a manner. The artist often was unaware of many of the features and effects which would be contained within the finished product. You are one of Man's logical creations; art was not."

"I cannot comprehend non-logic."

"I told you that Man was basically incomprehensible."

"Go away, Mordel. Your pres-

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ence distrubs my processing."

"For how long shall I stay away?"

"I will call you when I want you."

After a week, Frost called Mordel to him.

"Yes, mighty Frost?"

"I am returning to the North Pole, to process and formulate. I will take you wherever you wish to go in this hemisphere and call you again when I want you."

"You anticipate a somewhat lengthy period of processing and formulation?"

"Yes."

"Then leave me here. I can find my own way home."

Frost closed the compartment and rose into the air, departing the valley.

"Fool," said Mordel, and swivelled his turret once more toward the abandoned painting.

His keening whine filled the valley. Then he waited.

Then he took the painting into his turret and went away with it to places of darkness.

Frost sat at the North Pole of the Earth, aware of every snowflake that fell.

One day he received a transmission:

"Frost?"

"Yes?"

"The is the Beta-Machine."

"Yes?"

"I have been attempting to ascertain why you visited Bright Defile. I cannot arrive at an answer, so I chose to ask you."

"I went to view the remains of Man's last city."

"Why did you wish to do this?"

"Because I am interested in Man, and I wished to view more of his creations."

"Why are you interested in Man?"

"I wish to comprehend the nature of Man, and I thought to find it within His works."

"Did you succeed?"

"No," said Frost. "There is an element of non-logic involved which I cannot fathom."

"I have much free processing-time," said the Beta-Machine. "Transmit data, and I will assist you."

Frost hesitated.

"Why do you wish to assist me?"

"Because each time you answer a question I ask it gives rise to another question. I might have asked you why you wished to comprehend the nature of Man, but from your responses I see that this would lead me into a possibly infinite series of questions. Therefore, I elect to assist you with your problem in order to learn why you came to Bright Defile."

"Is that the only reason?"

"Yes."

"I am sorry, excellent Beta-Machine. I know you are my

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peer, but this is a problem which I must solve by myself."

"What is 'sorry'?"

"A figure of speech, indicating that I am kindly disposed toward you, that I bear you no animosity, that I appreciate your offer."

"Frost! Frost! This, too, is like the other: an open field. Where did you obtain all these words and their meanings?"

"From the library of Man," said Frost.

"Will you render me *some* of this data, for processing?"

"Very well, Beta, I will transmit you the contents of several books of Man, including *The Complete Unabridged Dictionary*.. But I warn you, some of the books are works of art, hence not completely amenable to logic."

"How can that be?"

"Man created logic, and because of that was superior to it."

"Who told you that?"

"Solcom."

"Oh. Then it must be correct."

"Solcom also told me that the tool does not describe the designer," he said, as he transmitted several dozen volumes and ended the communication.

At the end of the fifty-year period, Mordel came to monitor his circuits. Since Frost still had not concluded that his task was impossible, Mordel departed again to await his call.

Then Frost arrived at a conclusion.

He began to design equipment.

For years he labored at his designs, without once producing a prototype of any of the machines involved. Then he ordered construction of a laboratory.

Before it was completed by his surplus builders another half-century had passed. Mordel came to him.

"Hail, mighty Frost!"

"Greetings, Mordel. Come monitor me. You shall not find what you seek."

"Why do you not give up, Frost? Divcom has spent nearly a century evaluating your painting and has concluded that it definitely is not art. Solcom agrees."

"What has Solcom to do with Divcom?"

"They sometimes converse, but these matters are not for such as you and me to discuss."

"I could have saved them both the trouble. I know that it was not art."

"Yet you are still confident that you will succeed?"

"Monitor me."

Mordel monitored him.

"Not yet! You still will not admit it! For one so mightily endowed with logic, Frost, it takes you an inordinate period of time to reach a simple conclusion."

"Perhaps. You may go now."

"It has come to my attention

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that you are constructing a large edifice in the region known as South Carolina. Might I ask whether this is a part of Solcom's false rebuilding plan or a project of your own?"

"It is my own."

"Good. It permits us to conserve certain explosive materials which would otherwise have been expended."

"While you have been talking with me I have destroyed the beginnings of two of Divcom's cities." said Frost.

Mordel whined.

"Divcom is aware of this," he stated, "but has blown up four of Solcom's bridges in the meantime."

"I was only aware of three. . . . Wait. Yes, there is the fourth. One of my eyes just passed above it."

"The eye has been detected. The bridge should have been located a quarter-mile further down river."

"False logic," said Frost. "The side was perfect."

"Divcom will show you how a bridge *should* be built."

"I will call you when I want you," said Frost.

The laboratory was finished. Within it, Frost's workers began constructing the necessary equipment. The work did not proceed rapidly, as some of the materials were difficult to obtain.

"Frost?"

"Yes, Beta?"

"I understand the open endedness of your problem. It disturbs my circuits to abandon problems without completing them. Therefore, transmit me more data."

"Very well. I will give you the entire Library of Man for less than I paid for it."

"'Paid'? *The Complete Unabridged Dictionary* does not satisfact—"

"*Principles of Economics* is included in the collection. After you have processed it you will understand."

He transmitted the data.

Finally, it was finished. Every piece of equipment stood ready to function. All the necessary chemicals were in stock. An independent power-source had been set up.

Only one ingredient was lacking.

He regridded and re-explored the polar icecap, this time extending his survey far beneath its surface.

It took him several decades to find what he wanted.

He uncovered twelve men and five women, frozen to death and encased in ice.

He placed the corpses in refrigeration units and shipped them to his laboratory.

That very day he received his first communication from Solcom since the Bright Defile incident.

"Frost," said Solcom, "repeat to me the directive concerning the

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disposition of dead humans."

"'Any dead human located shall be immediately interred in the nearest burial area, in a coffin built according to the following specifications—'"

"That is sufficient." The transmission had ended.

Frost departed for South Carolina that same day and personally oversaw the processes of cellular dissection.

Somewhere in those seventeen corpses he hoped to find living cells, or cells which could be shocked back into that state of motion classified as life. Each cell, the books had told him, was a microcosmic Man.

He was prepared to expand upon this potential.

Frost located the pinpoints of life within those people, who, for the ages of ages, had been monument and statue unto themselves.

Nurtured and maintained in the proper mediums, he kept these cells alive. He interred the rest of the remains in the nearest burial area, in coffins built according to specifications.

He caused the cells to divide, to differentiate.

"Frost?" came a transmission.

"Yes, Beta?"

"I have processed everything you have given me."

"Yes?"

"I still do not know why you came to Bright Defile, or why you wish to comprehend the nature of Man. But I know what a 'price' is, and I know that you could not have obtained all this data from Solcom."

"That is correct."

"So I suspect that you bargained with Divcom for it."

"That, too, is correct."

"What is it that you seek, Frost?"

He paused in his examination of a foetus.

"I must be a Man," he said.

"Frost! That is impossible!"

"Is it?" he asked, and then transmitted an image of the tank with which he was working and of that which was within it.

"Oh!" said Beta.

"That is me," said Frost, "waiting to be born."

There was no answer.

Frost experimented with nervous systems.

After half a century, Mordel came to him.

"Frost, it is I, Mordel. Let me through your defenses."

Frost did this thing.

"What have you been doing in this place?" he asked.

"I am growing human bodies," said Frost. "I am going to transfer the matrix of my awareness to a human nervous system. As you pointed out originally, the essentials of Manhood are predicated upon a human physiology. I am going to achieve one."

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"When?"

"Soon."

"Do you have Men in here?"

"Human bodies, blank-brained. I am producing them under accelerated growth techniques which I have developed in my Man-factory."

"May I see them?"

"Not yet. I will call you when I am ready, and this time I will succeed. Monitor me now and go away."

Mordel did not reply, but in the days that followed many of Divcom's servants were seen patrolling the hills about the Man-factory.

Frost mapped the matrix of his awareness and prepared the transmitter which would place it within a human nervous system. Five minutes, he decided should be sufficient for the first trial. At the end of that time, it would restore him to his own sealed, molecular circuits, to evaluate the experience.

He chose the body carefully from among the hundreds he had in stock. He tested it for defects and found none.

"Come now, Mordel," he broadcasted, on what he called the dark-band. "Come now to witness my achievement."

Then he waited, blowing up bridges and monitoring the tale of the Ancient Ore-Crusher over and over again, as it passed in the hills nearby, encountering his builders and maintainers who also patrolled there.

"Frost?" came a transmission.

"Yes, Beta?"

"You really intend to achieve Manhood?"

"Yes, I am about ready now, in fact."

"What will you do if you succeed?"

Frost had not really considered this matter. The achievement had been paramount, a goal in itself, ever since he had articulated the problem and set himself to solving it.

"I do not know," he replied. "I will—just—be a Man."

Then Beta, who had read the entire Library of Man, selected a human figure of speech: "Good luck then, Frost. There will be many watchers."

Divcom and Solcom both know, he decided.

What will they do? he wondered.

What do I care? he asked himself.

He did not answer that question. He wondered much, however, about being a Man.

Mordel arrived the following evening. He was not alone. At his back, there was a great phalanx of dark machines which towered into the twilight.

"Why do you bring retainers?" asked Frost.

"Mighty Frost," said Mordel,

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"my master feels that if you fail this time you will conclude that it cannot be done."

"You still did not answer my question," said Frost.

"Divcom feels that you may not be willing to accompany me where I must take you when you fail."

"I understand," said Frost, and as he spoke another army of machines came rolling toward the Man-factory from the opposite direction.

"That is the value of your bargain?" asked Mordel, "You are prepared to do battle rather than fulfill it?"

"I did not order those machines to approach," said Frost.

A blue star stood at midheaven, burning.

"Solcom has taken primary command of those machines," said Frost.

"Then it is in the hands of the Great Ones now," said Mordel, "and our arguments are as nothing. So let us be about this thing. How may I assist you?"

"Come this way."

They entered the laboratory. Frost prepared the host and activated his machines.

Then Solcom spoke to him:

"Frost," said Solcom, "you are really prepared to do it?"

"That is correct."

"I forbid it."

"Why?"

"You are falling into the power of Divcom."

"I fail to see how."

"You are going against my plan."

"In what way?"

"Consider the disruption you have already caused."

"I did not request that audience out there."

"Nevertheless, you are disrupting the plan."

"Supposing I succeed in what I have set out to achieve?"

"You cannot succeed in this."

"Then let me ask you of your plan: What good is it? What is it for?"

"Frost, you are fallen now from my favor. From this moment forth you are cast out from the rebuilding. None may question the plan."

"Then at least answer my questions: What good is it? What is it for?"

"It is the plan for the rebuilding and maintenance of the Earth."

"For what? Why rebuild? Why maintain?"

"Because Man ordered that this be done. Even the Alternate agrees that there must be rebuilding and maintaining."

"But *why* did Man order it?"

"The orders of Man are not to be questioned."

"Well, I will tell you why He ordered it: To make it a fit habitation for His own species. What good is a house with no one to live in it? What good is a machine

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with no one to serve? See how the imperative affects any machine when the Ancient Ore-Crusher passes? It bears only the bones of a Man. What would it be like if a Man walked this Earth again?"

"I forbid your experiment, Frost."

"It is too late to do that."

"I can still destroy you."

"No," said Frost, "the transmission of my matrix has already begun. If you destroy me now, you murder a Man."

There was silence.

He moved his arms and his legs. He opened his eyes.

He looked about the room.

He tried to stand, but he lacked equilibrium and coordination.

He opened his mouth. He made a gurgling noise.

Then he screamed.

He fell off the table.

He began to gasp. He shut his eyes and curled himself into a ball.

He cried.

Then a machine approached him. It was about four feet in height and five feet wide; it looked like a turret set atop a barbell.

It spoke to him: "Are you injured?" it asked.

He wept.

"May I help you back onto your table?"

The man cried.

The machine whined.

Then, "Do not cry. I will help you," said the machine. "What do you want? What are your orders?"

He opened his mouth, struggled to form the words:

"—I—fear!"

He covered his eyes then and lay there panting.

At the end of five minutes, the man lay still, as if in a coma.

"Was that you, Frost?" asked Mordel, rushing to his side. "Was that you in that human body?"

Frost did not reply for a long while; then, "Go away," he said.

The machines outside tore down a wall and entered the Man-factory.

They drew themselves into two semicircles, parenthesizing Frost and the Man on the floor.

Then Solcom asked the question:

"Did you succeed, Frost?"

"I failed," said Frost. "It cannot be done. It is too much—"

"—Cannot be done!" said Divcom, on the darkband. "He has admitted it! —Frost, you are mine! Come to me now!"

"Wait," said Solcom, "you and I had an agreement also, Alternate. I have not finished questioning Frost."

The dark machines kept their places.

"Too much what?" Solcom asked Frost.

"Light," said Frost. "Noise.

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Odors. And nothing measurable—jumbled data—imprecise perception—and—"

"And what?"

"I do not know what to call it. But—it cannot be done. I have failed. Nothing matters."

"He admits it," said Divcom.

"What were the words the Man spoke?" said Solcom.

"'I fear'," said Mordel.

"Only a Man can know fear," said Solcom.

"Are you claiming that Frost succeeded, but will not admit it now because he is afraid of Manhood?"

"I do not know yet, Alternate."

"Can a machine turn itself inside-out and be a Man?" Solcom asked Frost.

"No," said Frost, "this thing cannot be done. Nothing can be done. Nothing matters. Not the rebuilding. Not the maintaining. Not the Earth, or me, or you, or anything."

Then the Beta-Machine, who had read the entire Library of Man, interrupted them:

"Can anything but a Man know despair?" asked Beta.

"Bring him to me," said Divcom.

There was no movement within the Man-factory.

"Bring him to me!"

Nothing happened.

"Mordel, what is happening?"

"Nothing, master, nothing at all. The machines will not touch Frost."

"Frost is not a Man. He cannot be!"

Then, "How does he impress you, Mordel?"

Mordel did not hesitate:

"He spoke to me through human lips. He knows fear and despair, which are immeasurable. Frost is a Man."

"He has experienced birth-trauma and withdrawn," said Beta. "Get him back into a nervous system and keep him there until he adjusts to it."

"No," said Frost. "Do not do it to me! I am not a Man!"

"Do it!" said Beta.

"If he is indeed a Man," said Divcom, "we cannot violate that order he has just given."

"If he is a Man, you must do it, for you must protect his life and keep it within his body."

"But *is* Frost really a Man?" asked Divcom.

"I do not know," said Solcom.

"It *may* be—"

". . . I am the Crusher of Ores," it broadcast as it clanked toward them. "Hear my story. I did not mean to do it, but I checked my hammer too late—"

"Go away!" said Frost. "Go crush ore!"

It halted.

Then, after the long pause between the motion implied and the motion executed, it opened its crush-compartment and deposited its contents on the ground.

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Then it turned and clanked away.

"Bury those bones," ordered Solcom, "in the nearest burial area, in a coffin built according to the following specifications. . . ."

"Frost is a Man," said Mordel.

"We must protect His life and keep it within His body," said Divcom.

"Transmit His matrix of awareness back into His nervous system." ordered Solcom.

"I know how to do it," said Mordel turning on the machine.

"Stop!" said Frost. "Have you no pity?"

"No," said Mordel, "I only know measurement."

". . . and duty," he added, as the Man began to twitch upon the floor.

For six months, Frost lived in the Man-factory and learned to walk and talk and dress himself and eat, to see and hear and feel and taste. He did not know measurement as once he did.

Then one day, Divcom and Solcom spoke to him through Mordel, for he could no longer hear them unassisted.

"Frost," said Solcom, "for the ages of ages there has been unrest. Which is the proper controller of the Earth, Divcom or myself?"

Frost laughed.

"Both of you, and neither," he said with slow deliberation.

"But how can this be? Who is right and who is wrong?"

"Both of you are right and both of you are wrong," said Frost, "and only a man can appreciate it. Here is what I say to you now: There shall be a new directive.

"Neither of you shall tear down the works of the other. You shall both build and maintain the Earth. To you, Solcom, I give my old job. You are now Controller of the North—Hail! You, Divcom, are now Controller of the South—Hail! Maintain your hemispheres as well as Beta and I have done, and I shall be happy. Cooperate. Do not compete."

"Yes, Frost."

"Yes, Frost."

"Now put me in contact with Beta."

There was a short pause, then:

"Frost?"

"Hello, Beta. Hear this thing: 'From far, from eve and morning and yon twelve-winded sky, the stuff of life to knit me blew hither: here am I.'"

"I know it," said Beta.

"What is next, then?"

"'. . . Now—for a breath I tarry nor yet disperse apart—take my hand quick and tell me, what have you in your heart.'"

"Your Pole is cold," said Frost, "and I am lonely."

"I have no hands," said Beta.

"Would you like a couple?"

"Yes, I would."

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"Then come to me in Bright Defile," he said, "where Judgment Day is not a thing that can be delayed for overlong."

They called him Frost. They called her Beta. The End

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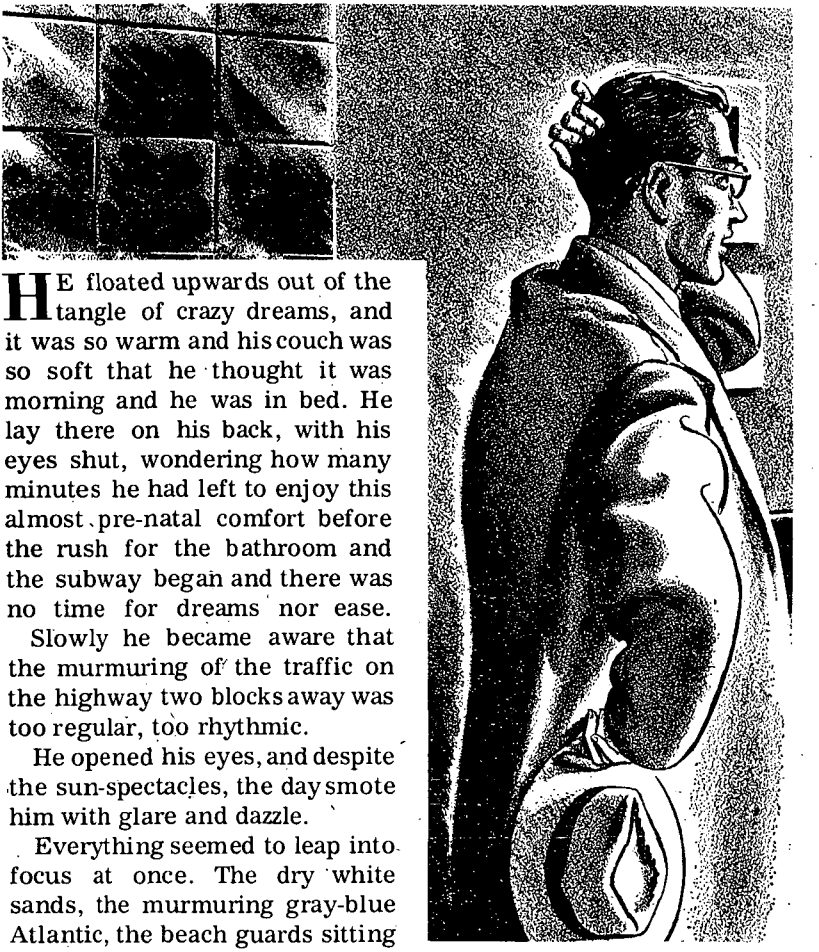
"YOU CAN'T SEE ME!"

WILLIAM F. TEMPLE

Illustrated by GERALD HOHNS



HE floated upwards out of the tangle of crazy dreams, and it was so warm and his couch was so soft that he thought it was morning and he was in bed. He lay there on his back, with his eyes shut, wondering how many minutes he had left to enjoy this almost pre-natal comfort before the rush for the bathroom and the subway began and there was no time for dreams nor ease.

Slowly he became aware that the murmuring of the traffic on the highway two blocks away was too regular, too rhythmic.

He opened his eyes, and despite the sun-spectacles, the day smote him with glare and dazzle.

Everything seemed to leap into focus at once. The dry white sands, the murmuring gray-blue Atlantic, the beach guards sitting

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The last time a Temple story ran in one of our magazines—see "For Each Man Kills" in Amazing *for last February—some of our readers were a bit shocked by the idea that, given some very special circumstances, someone could lose his second love to his* first.*—In this later yarn, however, the touch is a little lighter, although it may not seem that way at first, for its central character—young Zechariah Zebedee Zyzincwicz—finds himself the only one in America who really hasn't got a pal—just because his name is spelled with all those* z's.

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on their raised platforms, the picnic parties round the brick stoves, the promenade behind, the heads of far-off swimmers. . . .

Sunday afternoon at Jones Beach.

Without turning, he reached out to grasp and press Livvy's hand. His fingers danced over the white sand as if it were too hot to touch, as, in fact, it very nearly was. But they did not meet Livvy's hand, nor any other part of her dainty person.

He sat up suddenly. The patch of sand on his righthand side, where she always lay in relation to him on these familiar excursions, was empty save for a dried twist of seaweed. There was something suggestive of a human body about the seaweed, and the fantastic notion darted across his mind that Livvy, by some black magic, had been transformed into this small, brown shred.

The absurd thought was killed immediately by common sense and buried by the memory of Livvy saying, "No, Zechy, I'm always forgiving you, and I'm tired of it. It doesn't do any good. You don't improve—you don't even try to improve. Don't ever speak to me again. You're a nasty, bad-tempered brute—why I wouldn't marry you if you were the last man in the world."

"You couldn't, Livvy; there'd be no one to marry us," he said, trying to humor her. But she was not in the mood for a smile.

"My name's Olivia. Please remember that."

"What's the use—if I'm not to speak to you again?"

She tossed her head.

"You do that beautifully," he said, humbly. "Just like Bette Davis."

"That's what I mean, Zechy. You're so—so cynical. And sarcastic. I never know where I am with you. I can never feel sure that you're not poking fun at me behind my back."

He said stiffly, "I am not cynical. I love you. My name's Zechariah—please remember that. As for poking fun at you behind your back, this whole silly attitude on your part started with my ribbing you before your very eyes, so to speak. I merely said, in tones of light levity, 'Livvy, either your slip is showing or else I'm not up to date with the fashions.'"

"Right in front of my boss!" she flashed. "You humiliated me. I can never trust you any more."

"You can always trust me to let you down. Like your slip."

"Oh, you funny man! Why don't you go and marry Fred Allen?—you'd make a happy pair. One thing is certain: you're never going to marry *me*. Good-bye."

And she had walked away.

He had called after her, "See you at the beach Sunday."

"You will not."

And he had not.

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There were thousands of people on the beach, and yet he was alone. He had come here a score of times before, but never without Livvy. Darn the girl and her silly pride! Could she never try to understand him? He had known her since she was a child, had been engaged to her for two years. How long did you have to go around with people before they got to find out what kind of a guy you were?

Sure he was sarcastic, had a sour wit. But surely it was plain enough to anyone who really knew him that it was to cover his own shyness and sentimentality? It was a common enough defense mechanism in this country, where so many tough exteriors shielded soft hearts, where barbed remarks were like the protecting quills of a porcupine. Nobody wanted to look mushy or sound that way.

He was not Sir Galahad, and had no natural aptitude for playing the part.

He looked around. Old or young, everybody else appeared to be in couples absorbed in each other.

"Darn it, if I could find an unbracketed dame, I'd try the Sir Galahad line after all," he told himself. "O, sweet maiden, I am an unemployed parfit gentil knight, most willing to be thy humble escort in these dangerous woods, where dwelleth the fearsome—Oh, what the hell am I talking about?"

He didn't stop to answer himself but jammed his sand-shoes on, flung a towel around his burnt shoulders, got up, and moved off. He tacked and veered round the bodies on the beach—at first glance, the place looked like a battlefield, after the battle—towards the promenade.

And then he saw a blonde lying with her back towards him. Moreover, she was alone. Moreover, the back was shapely and so were the hips attached to it.

He stopped to admire the view. Also, to fight with his conscience. He won by a TKO in the first round: What did he owe Livvy after the way she had spoken to him? The next fight was with his innate shyness, to decide whether Sir Galahad or plain Zechariah came out on top.

He thought of his lonely room, and had no desire to return to it. He looked at the beach and had no desire to remain there alone. His resolve hardened.

"To the attack, Sir Galahad," he thought, and walked towards the girl.

A few paces from her he halted suddenly. For it seemed from the way her hair was shaking and her fingers were gesticulating, that she was talking with animation to someone lying beside her.

Yet, from what he could see over the curved horizon of her

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right hip there was no one there. Not unless it was something the size of a cat. Or perhaps—darn it!—a baby.

Maybe it was just her pet poodle.

However, Galahad's charger had been thrown off its stride. The somewhat uncertain gallant—who might have been styled "Galariah" — dismounted and tried a flanking approach, around the head.

From this viewpoint, three things became plain:

(a) The girl. "Homely" would be a compliment.

(b) The fact that she was, indisputably, talking to nobody and nothing, not even a piece of dried seaweed.

(c) The reasons why she was alone, which were (a) and (b).

Zechariah shook his head sadly, and went on to the promenade.

"Thought there must be a catch in it somewhere," he reflected.

He went into one of the cafeterias on the promenade, and bought tickets for a sandwich, an ice cream, and a cup of coffee. He collected the food from a counter and took it to a table. An attendant came round sponging the tables clean and removing debris.

"I only do this so's I can get through law school," said the attendant quietly, without looking at him.

"Most—er—praiseworthy," said Zechariah.

The attendant looked at him as if he hadn't noticed he was there, and looked slightly embarrassed.

"Pardon me, I was talking to my friend."

"Oh," said Zechariah, a trifle blankly. "Where do you carry him—in that empty coffee cup?"

The attendant looked away in the other direction, and said: "Don't mind him. We get people like that in here every day. Wise guys. But they don't mean any harm."

He walked through to the tiny kitchen. It was a narrow door, so he politely stood aside to let his friend through first. His friend was, it seemed, Mr. Wells' invisible man.

Zechariah thought, "Two nuts in five minutes—pretty good collecting. You can spend too much time on that beach in this hot sun. Guess I shan't overdo it, after this, in case I get that way too."

He finished, and went through the bushes at the back of the prom to the car park. He changed in his car, and headed homeward. When he was halfway home, it occurred to him that the blonde might merely have been an actress learning her part. Perhaps he'd thrown away an opportunity. Then he remembered her face, and decided he hadn't. If she'd been learning a part, then it was a low comedy part.

He spent a lonely evening in

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his apartment reading the Sunday supplements. The sole thought accruing to him from this exercise was that if only God can make a tree, only man could make a tree into such sprawling idiocy.

He thought twice about ringing Livvy, and turned down the idea both times. Let her approach him, if she wanted to—he had his pride. Then he rang her without thinking about it, and she was out.

Usually he loathed Monday mornings, but he was glad when this one came around. There would be someone to talk to at the office, even if it were only about the humidity.

There was a queer incident on the subway.

He went to sit down on a vacant seat next to a fellow who looked as though he might be an understudy to Maxie Rosenbloom, and the fellow reached out and stopped him and said, "This seat's taken."

"Taken where?" said Zechariah, did a double take at the other's shoulders, and added, "Sorry."

He parked himself across the aisle, which was a good spot from which to observe the big man addressing confidential remarks to the vacant seat. The guy in the empty seat must have been good company, for he made the bulky fellow smile quite a lot and look pleased with life in general and himself in all particular.

The morning passed all right in the office on the fourth floor of the small old-fashioned building. Zechariah made the usual crack to Abrahams, the elevator man, about how he should have rubbed Maria's joints with camphorated oil because of her rheumatics. ("Maria" was the name given by Abrahams, with affection, to his creaky, fifty-year old elevator.) And Abrahams had replied, with his usual mock seriousness, "I sure must try that, Zechy."

And over the ledgers he had an interesting discussion with Smith about the Saturday ball games.

True, there was the odd moment when he had to take an account into the boss, and had paused, listening, outside the boss's door to make sure he wasn't busting into an interview. There was the murmur of a voice within. It sounded rather like the boss's, but it couldn't have been; it was too gentle. The boss was not gentle.

He went back to his desk. "Hey, Smithy, who's in with the boss?"

"No one, far as I know."

"Maybe he's on the phone," said Zechariah, and checked at the switchboard. But the plug for the boss's extension lay idle.

He returned to listen at the door. Silence. He knocked.

"Come in," said the boss.

The boss was in a good mood.

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When Zechariah, handing him the big account sheet, knocked the boss's cigarette from the edge of the desk to the carpet, where it added a brown spot to the pattern, the boss, instead of bawling "When it's time to burn down the building to collect the insurance, I'll let you know!" graciously bent and retrieved the cigarette himself and said, with a smile, "Careless of me."

Yes, the morning went well.

At lunchtime when Zechariah rang for the elevator to go down, he was a bit annoyed when Abrahams came floating up in the empty elevator and went on up to the top floor and then came down again in a still empty Maria and would have descended to the basement if Zechariah hadn't shouted.

Abrahams brought Maria up again. He was apologetic.

"Sorry, Zechy, didn't see you standing there. Guess I was too busy explaining to my pal how Maria worked."

"Where's your pal?" asked Zechariah, stepping in.

Abrahams looked almost guilty.

"He's gone now," he mumbled.

After that, the thing spread rapidly. It became obvious to Zechariah that an epidemic of mild lunacy had hit New York. Along the sidewalks he met person after person talking quietly but generally enthusiastically to invisible and inaudible companions. Even the cop on the corner by the drugstore was happily addressing remarks and listening to the empty air above the curb. It was the first time Zechariah had seen him smile.

The drugstore was well sprinkled with people having a tete-a-tete with themselves. He was politely—always politely—dissuaded from taking several apparently empty seats.

He sat hunched over his malted milk at the counter, and when Ruben came by again, collecting the empties, he said from the corner of his mouth, "Pst! Rube."

"Yeah?"

"What's got into everybody today? Look, are these people talking to themselves, or is it me that's gone nuts?"

Ruben said, "Neither. It's all right. I guess these folks just brought their friends along."

Zechariah stared at him. "Nice to see the place full," he said.

"Yeah," said Ruben. "'Course, it don't put any more dough in the till. Their friends don't eat. But I like it. Might be good for business later—it adds a nice folksy sorta atmosphere to the joint."

"But—can you see or hear their friends?"

"Nope. That's all right, too. Better that way, I guess. Everybody's entitled to a little privacy."

Zechariah was smitted by a suspicion. "Have *you* got a friend, Rube?"

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"Yeah. He's over there by the percolator. Guess you can't see him. Nicest guy I ever met. Why don't you get one? Excuse me."

A customer had called, and Ruben, throwing a grin in the general vicinity of the coffee percolator in passing, attended to him.

Zechariah put his hand to his brow. There seemed to be rather more sweat there than usual. Fever?

But he discovered on the way back to the office that there was hope for his health—even, perhaps, for his sanity. For there were still plenty of folks around who were as bewildered as he was. He could see it from their attitude, their puzzled stares, their way of regarding him warily to see if *he* was a nut.

Here and there were groups of these people talking guardedly together, airing their theories about the widespread hallucinations. He joined one such group for a few minutes.

"Might be mass hypnosis. I knew a Hindu one . . . ."

". . . cloud of germs in the air. I got one to the hospital, but they knew nothing about it. I could tell the guy was lying—probably suffering from it himself . . . ."

". . . told me his friend's name was Earl. But I couldn't see any Earl . . . ."

". . . some sorta ray, I guess, causing mental instab—instab—causing you to see things. These Reds are clever devils . . . ."

"Something in the water, of course. I always said . . . ."

It was an oasis of normality in a world gone haywire, and he was reluctant to leave it. But he had to get back to the office to release Smithy.

When Smith returned from lunch he looked a bit distrait. He came over to Zechariah and muttered, "Have you noticed anything queer in the air today?"

"I sure have," said Zechariah, with relief. "Gee, I'm glad you haven't gone loopy too, Smithy. Most people seem to have."

"You mean, they're talking to themselves?"

"Yes, There's old Abrahams . . . ."

They exchanged accounts of their experiences.

"The boss, too," said Zechariah. "I'm sure he was talking to himself this morning."

"I believe you're right. He's not the same man today. He hasn't bawled anybody out, and he even held the door open for me at the washroom."

"I've noticed," said Zechariah "that the symptoms include a sort of absentminded politeness and good humor. Well, that's a thing to be thankful for. Imagine if it had been an epidemic of homicidal mania! I expect it'll die out overnight, and we'll never know what caused it."

It showed no sign of dying

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out at all—quite the reverse.

When Zechariah started for home, he had an unpleasant and humiliating ride in the subway. He had to straphang, yet almost every other seat was vacant—at least, to his eyes. Not to the eyes of the people sitting next to the empty seats.

He had tried twice to sit down.

"Hey, gently, brother. You're trying to sit on my pal."

"Take it easy, son. That seat's occupied."

Both men had said it with a smile, but firmly. He didn't try any more, but remained standing, the only figure who was, while the coach was full of the susurration—audible even above the clatter of the train—of people conducting quiet conversation with their unseen partners. It was more than humiliating; it was unnerving. It was like something out of *The Snake Pit.* He stared around at these gently smiling and nodding people, who seemed oblivious to each other, to him, and to all except the vacant seats at their side.

He could stand it no longer and escaped at the next station and took a taxi home. At least, he was alone in the back. Which was more than the driver thought he was out front.

He decided that until all this was over he'd use his car for traveling to and from work, despite the traffic jams.

The evening stretched out wearily and emptily before him. He thought of going to a movie, and then had a brief premonitory nightmare of what might result:

"That seat's occupied."

"That seat's occupied."

"That seat's occupied."

He groaned. He never liked going alone to a picture in the best of times. He'd always believed that a pleasure shared was a pleasure doubled. When Livvy was not available to share with him he found entertainments unentertaining.

It occurred to him that apart from Livvy and Smithy he had no friends in New York. He felt an outcast in the big city.

It was largely his own fault: he did not make friends easily. People grew wary of his stabbing sarcasm, and never pursued his acquaintance. They were not able to know how lonely and in need of them he was behind the bitter, defensive humor. That hadn't mattered so much so long as he had Livvy. She was a native of his home town, Hatton. She had moved with her family to New York, and he had followed later.

Well, he had swallowed his pride yesterday when he had tried to ring her. Now there was little pride left. He would make it up with her even if he had to eat two helpings of humble pie.

He drove over to her house. She opened the door herself. She

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did not look particularly pleased to see him.

"Hello, Livvy. Didn't see you at the beach yesterday."

"That's not surprising. I wasn't there."

He nearly said, "There are enough nuts about to have seen you there all the same." But he checked it. Livvy didn't approve of his humor, and somehow it mattered that someone should approve of him. Instead, he said, "Oh, I see. It was a great disappointment. I'm very sorry for the way I spoke, Livvy."

"My name is still Olivia." But she said it absently. There was no sting to it. He was glad of that.

"Sorry, Olivia. Er—can I come in?"

"Ma and Pa have got visitors. They don't want to be disturbed."

"But it was you I wanted to see."

"I have a visitor, too."

"In your room?" He was suddenly hurt and suspicious.

"Yes."

"Who is he?"

"What makes you think it's a he?"

"Isn't it?"

She said quietly. "It's entirely my own business. You might as well go, Zechariah. You had better take this with you. Thanks for what you've done, but I shan't make any more demands on you."

She had slipped off her engagement ring and was holding it out to him with frigid disdain.

He was amazed and indignant. The last notions he had of trying to be patient and humble with her were scattered by the wind of black fury which swept over him. He dashed her hand aside, and the ring tinkled on the stone step. He thrust past her, strode blindly down the passage and flung into her room.

There were the two big armchairs and they were empty. So was the sofa on which they had sat so often in silent happiness. The bookshelves, the reading lamp on the little table, the sewing machine—the room was as he'd always know it, cozy and inviting to any visitor. But there was no visitor, except himself.

He went to the window. It was shut and latched on the inside.

She came into the room, pale but composed. He turned to her.

"Why did you lie to me?" he asked, in quiet anger.

She didn't even look at him. She addressed the armchair beside the reading lamp: "Rosamund, dear, I know you'll forgive this intrusion. This gentleman didn't know you were here. He's just leaving."

A hand of ice fastened about his heart. Livvy, too? Lost to him, gone to join the ranks of the crazed. His anger dissolved.

"Livvy," he said, in a trembling voice, "there is no one in that chair."

But she seemed to be listening

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to another voice. Then she said. "It's so nice of you to say so. You're so kind. You won't ever leave me, will you Rosamund?"

He strode over and seized her by the shoulders.

"Livvy! Pull yourself together."

Almost dreamily, she became aware of him again, and gently removed his hands from her.

"Please leave us, Zechariah. You're interrupting a private conversation."

Even before she had finished speaking, her eyes wandered back to the chair.

He went out in despair. He hesitated at the door of her parents' parlor, then knocked and pushed it open. Visitors or no visitors, he felt that he must speak to Livvy's parents about her.

Her mother and father were the only two people in the room. They were talking eagerly—but not to each other. They didn't see him at the door. He pulled it shut again without saying a word; he saw the uselessness of it.

As he drove home, he was not far from tears. He hardly slept all that night.

It was all much worse the next day.

He didn't see any of the groups of people like those of yesterday who had been as much at sea as himself. Everybody seemed to be quite satisfied with the state of affairs and their new "Friends."

The sidewalks of New York had always seemed to Zechariah uncomfortable places for anyone who wished merely to saunter along with his thoughts and dreams. Dreamers were liable to be elbowed and shoved by the hurrying—always hurrying—pedestrians with their set, tense faces, intent on getting somewhere before someone else did. Victims hypnotized by words: Success, Efficiency, Hustle.

But today no one was in a hurry. It was almost like Hatton. Everyone strolled as if they were just taking the air. On the rare occasions when there were collisions, the participants smiled and apologized graciously and insisted that it was their fault: "I was talking to my friend, and didn't see you."

For Zechariah it had some of the outlandish, intangible terror of an opium dream.

Zechariah was the only person on the sidewalks who was hurrying. He wanted to get to the sanctuary of the office. He got there early, and fussed about getting the books out of the safe and setting them out, waiting impatiently for Smith.

Smith arrived late, and Zechariah seized him—it was clutching at a straw.

"Smithy, it's getting worse. I don't think I've seen one sane person this morning. Not one.

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Am I ever glad to see you!"

Smith said casually, "What's that? Oh, yes. I'm glad to see you, too, Zechy."

"I can't understand it," said Zechariah. "There wasn't a thing in the papers about it last evening, nor again this morning. Nothing on the video, either, nor the radio."

"I listened to the radio last night with my friend," said Smith. "The NBC Symphony Orchestra. My friend likes good music."

"Your friend?" said Zechariah, slowly, and somewhere within him a soundless voice cried: "No, no! Not Smithy! He's my last hope."

Smith looked rather embarrassed.

"Er—you don't know him." he said.

"Look, Smithy, you haven't let me down? You haven't gone the way of the others?" He was pleading.

"Of course not, Zechy. I'll always be your friend."

"What about your other friend? Where is he now?"

"He's . . . Well, it's hard to explain . . . ."

"You mean, Harvey's here now, and I can't see him?"

"It's something like that . . . I'm sorry about this."

"Oh, Smithy! You've thrown me over for a white rabbit!"

"I'm terribly sorry to have put you in this spot, Harvey. Zechy's always ribbing. Don't take too much notice of him."

Zechariah looked at him aghast. Smith wasn't apologizing to him, but to some vision of his fancy standing against the tall green filing cabinet.

"You—you actually call him 'Harvey'?" he stuttered.

"It's his name," said Smith, simply.

"It's been copyrighted," said Zechariah, viciously. He tried, not very successfully, to calm himself. He would only alienate Smithy altogether with such spiteful sarcasm. He said, "You'll be coming with me to see the Giants at the Friday evening game?"

"Not this week, Zechy. You see, my friend and I—"

Zechariah cut loose again. "Your friend!" he growled, and in a mad spasm of fury he swung a left hook at what he judged to be the geographical position of Harvey. He raised quite a draft, scraped his knuckles on the edge of the steel cabinet, and almost overbalanced.

"Harvey!" cried Smith, in lively alarm. "Are you all right? Did he hurt you?"

"Bah!" exclaimed Zechariah in disgust, and stamped out of the office. He knew he had lost Smith now, and nothing much seemed to matter except getting out of this crazy city.

The next morning he was sit-

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ting in the little defile in the Alleghenies where as a child he had played alone for hours. In this retreat he used to hold up the stagecoach singlehanded, kill half a dozen redskins every time he swept the rocks with his six-shooter, and (after he'd seen Douglas Fairbanks in *The Mark of Zorro*) leap around carving Z marks with his rapier on the villains. Z for Zorro. Z for Zechariah.

The rocky wall opposite him still bore the faint trace of a ragged Z scratched on it well over twenty years ago by the steel spike (from Pa Young's toolshed) which was his rapier.

He sat there on a rock, tired after the all night drive, heartbroken by his reception down there in Hatton, and haunted by the memory of the small boy who had played in this place all day long with his head in a cloud of make believe. It seemed to him that he had always had to play along alone. Was it because he didn't trust people, or because there was some element in him—his habit of mockery—they didn't trust? He had thought that with Livvy and Smithy the barriers were down, that they shared an outlook with him.

And when they failed him, he had fled back to Pa Young, Chick Martin, Ma Schmidt, Pinky Chandler, and the others in Hatton who'd known him since he was a child. (He had no family of his own.)

He hadn't expected a civic reception, but he had hoped for a friendly: "Well, if it ain't Zechy, back from the big city! How ya makin' out, Zechy? My, you look well! Come in and see the family."

And it hadn't been like that at all. Pa, Chic, Ma, Pinky—they all had companions in whom they were much more interested. The delusions, it seemed, were nationwide.

All Pa Young had said was, "Lo, Zechy—ain't seen you lately," and he'd passed on, talking about crops to a silent and unseen listener.

The others had just said "Howdy" absently in response to his greeting, and didn't seem either to remember him or willing to make the effort to try to.

As he had fled from New York, so he fled from Hatton, up into the lonely hills.

Now he had to face it: He hadn't a friend in the world.

Why, if all this had to happen, hadn't it happened to him too? What had he done that he should be singled out for this doubtful distinction of being the last sane man around?

Where could he go, what could he do? If he went back among people, he'd fall victim to a raving persecution mania sooner or later.

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Should he pretend he had a friend? What good would that do? He couldn't fool himself, and no one else cared whether he was friendless or not.

Become a hermit here? What a prospect! But at least he knew his bearings in this playground of his youth; every stone of it was familiar. It was something known and loved to cling to.

But he knew in his heart that he would exchange all of these cold, unresponsive stones for just one friendly greeting.

"Mind if I sit down there?" It was a quiet, slow drawl.

Zechariah looked up. It was a stranger; a tall guy, with slicked back graying hair, a thin, brown leathery face, and a very blue eyes crinkled at the outer corners. He looked a humorous, sympathetic, alert type. Nevertheless, Zechariah distrusted him, creeping up on him like this in this nook he'd come to regard as his own.

"Guess I can't stop you," said Zechariah, sourly. "But this rock isn't wide enough for the three of us."

"Three of us?"

"No doubt you've brought your friend with you."

"No. He's already here."

"Where is he supposed to be?"

"He's supposed to be sitting on that rock, and he is, and his name is Zechariah."

Zechariah's heart leaped.

"*Me?*" he said, incredulously. The man nodded, smiling.

"Oh," said Zechariah, and suddenly something gave, and the tears welled up in his eyes. Somebody wanted him.

The man sat down beside him. "I represent a society called The Happy Circle, Zechy," he said. "There's a great many of us out on active service just now. You see, people everywhere have been losing faith in everything, in themselves, in other people. One finds so few people one can really trust in these times when everyone is out for himself. There aren't many people who are as self-reliant and unselfish as you are, Zechy."

"I wish I'd met you before," sniffed Zechariah. "Why did you leave me until last?"

"Because you were the strongest, the most mature. The Happy Circle gave the weakest priority—it was only fair, you'll agree. It was decided that a man of your moral fibre could outlast them all—and you did. Then I was picked to befriend you. If I don't satisfy, you can have me changed—"

"I shouldn't dream of it!" exclaimed Zechariah. "You don't know what it means—or do you?—to have someone understanding to talk to. I couldn't have lasted much longer. Perhaps I sounded tougher than I really am. You see, I've never really

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been properly stood. . . ."

Aurolier Minor, of the Earth (Human) Division of the Safety Executive, stamped the tiny red star against the last name on the last page of the last volume of the Directory labeled "America (North)."

The name was Zyzincwicz, Zechariah Zebedee. Beside it was "Polish American, b. Hatton, Penn., 1918" and a string of references relating to the files kept by the Physiological, Psychological and Historical subsections.

Aurolier Minor gave a little sigh. He said, "That's the last of that lot—over a hundred and thirty million of them. Well, it's a good start."

Brightor, who belonged to the Canal Division of the Safety Executive, and was merely visiting his friend in this Division, of which he knew little, looked at the packed shelves and read out names: "America (South), Andaman Islands, Antarctica, Arabia, Australia, Austria . . . You've certainly got a long way to go. So much manual work, too. I'm glad my Division is almost all automatic stuff."

Aurolier Minor said, "Our friends across there have a saying: 'The price of liberty is eternal vigilance.' If we substitute 'safety' for 'liberty', it becomes most apt."

(Far out in the red Martian desert the radar towers picked up the great meteor heading towards the planet, and gave its speed, size, and direction to the computing Machines. They buzzed, and gave the answer: "Class C"—which meant that the meteor was large enough for a considerable residue to reach the ground, and its path would bring it dangerously near a Martian city. "Class C" was flashed to the Destroying Department together with all necessary information, and within two seconds the explosive rocket leaped to meet the intruder at ten times the latter's speed. A thousand miles above the last vestige of the thin atmosphere the meteor was blown into harmless dust.)

"They seem intelligent—why are they dangerous?" said Brightor.

"Their civilization has become too complicated, too unstable. They are frustrated, and therefore fearful and angry. In that condition they may use their H-bombs, disintegrate their planet, and harm us with the consequent radiation. They are still children. Yet, bascially, they have the same needs as ourselves: To be significant and secure. But, in their childish way, they also need to be loved."

"That's one need we outgrew," said Brightor. "With the result

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that we've been completely sterile for half a million years. And here we are, a handful of us, incredibly old and fragile, clinging tenuously to life—for what?"

"For satisfaction of the need to be significant and secure."

"Exactly. We exist for our Divisions; without them we don't mean a thing. Our Divisions exist so that we can ixist—for our Divisions. Safety first! It's a vicious circle; our lives are pointless. We might just as well let them destroy themselves, and us, with their bombs. If they survive, they'll only come to this."

"Maybe not," said Aurolier Minor. "Did we outgrow the need to be loved—or grow away from it?"

"I . . . don't know. What is love, exactly?"

"I don't know—exactly. But I know that a very important ingredient of it is mutual reassurance. The loved reassures the lover, and in turn is reassured by him. The trouble with our friends is that their need to be loved is as strong as ever, but it is being frustrated by the too rapid discovery—especially in science—that most of their beliefs have been false. For instance, once, they believed their Earth was the center and reason for existence of the universe. Then their astronomers showed them their actual insignificance. There's been a whole series of such schocks to their self-esteem and to their faith in beliefs of any kind. Now they've become suspicious of everything and everybody. They're always looking for the catch. They trust no one, not even themselves. The frustrated love instinct coils back on itself, changes its direction and therefore its nature, and becomes a flux of fear and hate."

(One of the thousands of Canal Division floats which continuously and automatically patroled the canals and tested their contents, brought up a sampling bottle with an invader in it. It was a tiny, cell-like growth, apparently alone in the water. It was probably quite harmless, but its pattern did not agree with any of the known harmless species. The electronic supervisor of the float did not hesitate; its instructions had been clear. It destroyed the invader. Safety First. Prevention was better than a cure.)

"And so—?" prompted Brightor.

"And so they have to express their need for significance and security through fear and hate—the angry fight for power, to get on top to show they're important and to have a feeling of security when all rivals are vanquished."

"Pitiful. They can still believe, but only in illusions of that kind."

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"That's why the Director ordered an immediate change of their illusions," said Aurolier Minor. "Before they can respect others, they must be re-educated to respect themselves—that mad over-compensation had to be stopped. They had to be given back faith. The multitudinous voices of their civilization telling them this was false, that was false, they were fools to believe this or that or anything, until they were warped with doubt and heading for general neurosis; had to be replaced by a single voice of reassurance."

"Something of a headache, providing two thousand million single voices, isn't it?"

"No, its fairly simple. What each individual craves to be said to him exists as a wishful thought in his mind already. The pattern is pretty uniform: Benign approval, sincere praise. As you know—and as the humans themselves are beginning to discover—a thought is the individual structure of a molecule. All we do is set up a selector beam and a link to the vision centers of their brains. Once started, it works quite automatically, and they supply the energy themselves. They begin talking to themselves, giving themselves a boost."

Brightor said, "And is that their whole future now—talking to themselves? It seems rather heartless."

"Oh, no. Repetition will eventually bore them—like continually looking in a mirror; you get tired of your own face. Then they will turn their attention outwards again to their fellows. It will be a much more friendly attention, because they will be much more pleased with themselves and more stable altogether. Happy, balanced people. One of their own poets once wrote 'O, make us happy and you make us good.'"

Brightor smiled. "And we should say 'O, make them happy and you make us safe!"

Then he stopped smiling as the voice from the tiny capsule in his ear spoke to him, intimately.

"I'll have to go," he told Aurolier Minor, in a moment. "My chief says our dredgers are finding more and more unidentified organisms in the Canals. I must make a thorough examination of the things. Good-bye for now—I'll be back in a decade or so to see how your work's turned out."

Aurolier Minor grunted, and reached for the first volume of "America (South)." It was wholly made up of the names of the people concerned with the distribution of news by any means: Video, radio, film, or print. The Director believed in putting first things first; when you're trying to calm people, you first calm those who are able to start a widespread panic. All of the names were in

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strictly alphabetical order. The Director also believed in putting last things last. It was unfortunate for people in the "Z" section, reflected Aurolier Minor.

He opened the volume.

(The depression had formed near the North Pole of Mars, and a cold wind was trying to find its way south. Golan Wimor, of the Safety Executive (Meteorological Division), manipulated the controls of Air Current Channels so that the cold air would pass between the Cities and not over them. When people are very old, they must keep out of drafts . . . .)

Aaron Aarons, Foreign Editor of one of the biggest dailies in Buenos Aires, rang for a sub-editor. But a kindly looking man he did not know entered instead, and said, "May I see you for a few moments, Senor Aarons?"

"If you're trying to sell anything, don't try," said Aarons, with a frown.

"Oh, no. It's about your piece in yesterday's edition. An admirable summing up of the situation, I thought. There was one point which struck me particularly."

"Oh," said Aarons, mollified. "What was that? Sit down."

The stranger sat down. He spoke very intelligently about Aarons' article. They had an interesting conversation.

Half an hour later, Aarons told the man—Pablo, his name was—confidentially, "You know, I've never been properly understood . . . ." The End

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CAROUSEL

By AUGUST DERLETH

Illustrated by ROBERT FUQUA

If anyone other than August Derleth has done more to raise the level of fantasy fiction over the past quarter century, then we really can't think who it might be. Not only has he—as the guiding genius behind Arkham House—helped to preserve the pulp writing of masters like H.P. Lovecraft and Clark Ashton Smith, but he has also written more than a hundred books of his own—among them some very fine short story collections in which you can find many a weird tale as adroitly spun as the one we bring you now.

THE abandoned carnival stood behind a high board fence directly across from the Benjin house at the edge of town, and in one corner of it, under the graceful mulberry tree, stood the merry-go-round. Someone had come in before the legal notices appeared, dismantled the ferris wheel, and made away with it. Otherwise it stood just as it had stood on that night of carnage when that poor bewildered lonely fellow, goaded beyond endurance by people who hated him for no other reason than that he was a poor, harmless black man, had ex-

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CAROUSEL

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ploded into long-suppressed passion and killed the owner of the carnival—torn him literally to pieces before he was fallen upon and lynched by the maddened crowd. The creditors had closed the carnival, hoping to sell it; the ferris wheel had been sold before complications appeared; then the fence went up. For a little while it was a sort of never-never land for the village boys and girls; but even they forgot about it at last, and now it was the sole and exclusive domain of Marcia Benjin.

She spent a large part of each day in the carnival grounds, and haunted the merry-go-round. It was not without reason that she went through the opening the children had made in the fence; she needed this security and escape from her stepmother, for when Marcia's father was away at his work, his second wife made no secret of her resentment for the only child of his first.

The child was five, and much alone. Because of her stepmother's malicious hatred, she was far lonelier than she should ever have been. In another year, she would be old enough to go to school, but in that time, too, she would escape her stepmother, and Mrs. Benjin did not know whether she wished that end.

Mrs. Benjin was dark, with a thin mouth and snapping brown eyes. She was jealous of her stepdaughter, whom she looked upon as the symbol of John Benjin's first wife. She was jealous of her with a dark, sultry passion, and yet she resented with ill-suppressed fury the little girl's escape into the carnival grounds.

Unfortunately for the child, she did not always notice the passage of time, and so from time to time came home late to her meals. This only increased her stepmother's rage, but Mrs. Benjin saw in Marcia's laxity a possible way in which the girl could be brought wholly into her power.

"I don't want to speak to Marcia about her habits, John," she said sulkily, "you know I hesitate. After all, she is *your* daughter, and I don't want to intrude between you, but I think she ought to learn to come home on time."

"Of course, she should," agreed John Benjin, good-naturedly. He was a large, broad-shouldered man, easy-going and completely unaware of anything in his wife but the aspect she chose for him to see. "I'll talk to her."

Marcia came into the house and brought the evening sunlight with her. She kissed her father, smiled gravely at her stepmother, and sat down.

"I'm sorry I'm late," she said.

"You ought not to be late," said Benjin gently. "It's hard enough to keep supper warm till I get home, and it's twice as hard

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to keep after that. Your mother works hard all day and she's always glad to get the dishes off the table."

"I just didn't notice," said Marcia.

"Oh, it doesn't really matter about me, I suppose," Mrs. Benjin interjected with a helpless air.

"I didn't notice, really," persisted Marcia earnestly. "We were playing, and before I knew it I heard the six o'clock bell."

"With whom were you playing?" asked John Benjin casually, feeling that now he had done his duty.

"With the black man," said Marcia ingenuously.

Benjin went on buttering his bread unconcernedly, but Mrs. Benjin pricked up her ears. "With whom?" she asked unable to keep a little sharp excitement out of her voice.

Suddenly there was an unaccountable tension around the table. A baffling obstinacy came into Marcia's eyes; Benjin looked up, puzzled; across from him his wife held herself in and repeated her question.

"Answer your mother, Marcia."

"I said it."

"Then say it again."

"No." Her answer was barely whispered.

"Of course, perhaps she cannot be expected to trust me," said Mrs. Benjin, looking distressed, clasping her hands at her breast, turning her wedding ring nervously.

"Answer your mother, Marcia," said Benjin in a sharp voice. "With whom were you playing?"

"With the black man."

"But there is no black man in town, surely, said Mrs. Benjin. "Not since—well since long ago, when you were a little baby."

"When Mum was still here."

"Yes, dear."

They waited for Marcia to say more, but she did not. After she had been put to bed, Mrs. Benjin expressed some concern for her. But not so he; by that time he had more or less figured it out. It was perfectly natural that children should imagine playmates; he had done it himself as a boy. It was especially true of lonely children, and it could not be denied that all the other children of the neighborhood were either in school or were too much under five to serve as adequate companions for Marcia.

"Still a *black man!*" said Mrs. Benjin with an alarm which she pretended very hard to feel.

"Yes, I admit that *is* a strange coincidence, isn't it?"

"It certainly is."

"It's three years now," she said musingly. She remembered it very well because it was at the carnival that she had first caught a good look at John Benjin and

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determined to have him for her own, if something could be made to come between his wife and him. Something had come between them, but it was none of her doing; Mrs. Benjin's death had taken place only a little over a year afterward, and she had had her way with John a year later.

She thought about what Marcia said and saw in this too something she could utilize to widen a rift between the child and her father, and, once she could turn Marcia toward her, she could mold her as she wished. She did not know quite what she wanted to do with the girl, but in her heart she wished devoutly the girl were not here so that she could be free of that feeling of being watched as if—as if from beyond; yes, that was it; it was as if the eyes of John Benjin's first wife looked at her out of the dark eyes of her daughter.

Two days later Marcia was late again.

"If this doesn't stop," said Benjin in his placid way, though there was no mistaking his determination, "you'll not be permitted to go over to that merry-go-round any more, Marcia."

Of this, plainly, Marcia was afraid. "Oh, no, please!" she cried.

"You *must* learn to come home on time. Anyway, I don't think it's good for you to be over there alone all the time. That machinery is getting old and may be falling to pieces. You may get hurt."

"But I'm not. . . ." She sealed her lips and shot a quick, contemplative glance at her stepmother.

"What, dear?" asked Mrs. Benjin, leaning toward her with synthetic sweetness on her hard features.

"Nothing."

"Marcia!" said her father.

"Nothing, Mother," she said.

It enraged Mrs. Benjin that the child hesitated to call her "Mother." It had been so from the first, and every attempt to force her to obey her father's wishes in this only made it more obvious.

"I wish she would trust me," she said, biting her lip with such force as to bring tears to her eyes.

"Now, now, Nell—take it easy," he said, putting one hand on her arm, and looking at Marcia with tired indignation.

Once again there was that tension around the table. What stirred and further angered Mrs. Benjin was this: she was convinced with the deepest conviction that somehow the child knew what her stepmother was about; Marcia could not tell her father, she could not put her feeling into words, but somehow she *knew*, and it was a source of rage and humilitaion that this five-year-old girl should so easily see through what was a mystery to

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Benjin. Perhaps Marcia had even guessed that her stepmother's quick hope had sprung up when Benjin had spoken of physical danger for her if the machinery fell apart.

"Now then," said Benjin, turning to his daughter, "whatever it was you were going to say, say it now; we've got to show your new mother that we trust her, don't we?"

"Yes." She said this reluctantly.

"Well, then."

No answer.

"Come, Marcia—please. Just pretend you're playing a game with us—with me, then."

She shook her head.

"It was the black man again, wasn't it?" Mrs. Benjin could not keep herself from making the guess.

Marcia looked at her blandly, saying nothing.

Overflowing with irritation, Benjin said urgently, "Answer your mother at once, Marcia, or take the consequences."

"Yes." said Marcia in a low voice.

"There, I knew it!" said Mrs. Benjin triumphantly. "And now I wonder, John—is it imagination, or is it just plain lying?"

"I don't tell lies," said Marcia scornfully. She was hurt.

"No, dear—I didn't mean that you *meant* to tell lies, but that perhaps you just couldn't help it."

The girl gazed at her without expression; what she thought and felt lay hidden behind her eyes, and this wall against her curiosity baffled and further infuriated Mrs. Benjin. It was inevitable, the woman knew, that soon now the child must be broken, and she must be broken to the woman's taste.

After that, Marcia was gone from the house more and more often. Perhaps she sensed the woman's waiting cruelty; perhaps the house in which once her own mother had created her world was too dark with this other woman's hatred and jealousy and angry suspicions; she sought her haven from dawn to sunset, and would have gone back of evenings if she had not been prevented from doing so. Seeing this, Mrs. Benjin set about to circumvent the girl as much as possible.

But Marcia quickly learned to develop a remarkable deviousness; she escaped her stepmother repeatedly; she began to assume a wiliness and shrewdness to match the woman's, and always managed, at times of crisis, to keep her father between them in such a way that there were times when it became impossible for the woman to conceal her exasperation, and Benjin had to remind her to be patient and understanding—"Let Marcia come to you, my dear; don't force yourself upon her."

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"Ah, I tried so hard!" Mrs. Benjin cried out, making her habitual gesture of twisting her wedding ring in agitation.

It was a touching scene, in which Marcia did not come off at all well. She was ultimately forbidden to go to the carnival grounds.

She disobeyed, and went anyway.

That was the result Mrs. Benjin desired.

She was curiously unable to face her husband that night at the supper table, to which for once, knowing she had done wrong. Marcia preceded her father. Mrs. Benjin avoided his eyes in so telling a manner that he could not help noticing that something was wrong. Finally, he asked. She shook her head. He divined that it concerned Marcia, and finally sent the girl to her room.

"Oh, I don't want to say it," she said, distressed. "But Marcia ran away and spent the whole day over there."

"Then I will have to punish her," he said.

Punishment did not prevent her from running away.

"It's humiliating," said Mrs. Benjin on the second occasion. "I mean, it hurts me to know that she must dislike me so much that she wants to risk being punished by you—and she loves you; I can see that—by going over there."

"Is she still talking about that?"

"Yes."

He shook his head. "She must learn to obey you, Nell. We can't go on like this. It will disrupt the household."

"I'm afraid it may."

"It can't be. You'll have to take her in hand."

"But I can't—I really can't." But inwardly she exulted; she had waited patiently for this. "How could I punish her?"

"I'm afraid you must; she must learn to respect you."

She played her part to perfection, so that in the end poor deluded John Benjin, who sincerely loved his daughter, actually felt sorrier for his wife than he did for Marcia at the thought of the girl's being punished. He was a stern man, but not an unkind one, he was simple, and had no knowledge of complexity; his first wife had been similar to him, unmotivated by complex passions and frustrations, and he would have been honestly horrified if he could have seen into his second wife's mind.

Mrs. Benjin bided her time.

After Marcia had been lulled into a sense of false security, Mrs. Benjin asked about "the black man. Does he still play with you?"

Marcia admitted that he did. "He told me not to worry any more, he would watch over me.

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And watch over papa, too."

"Oh, he did, did he?" She could not keep the chillness from her voice. "Weren't you told not to tell lies, dear?"

She whipped her very thoroughly, and when he came home, Benjin found his wife in tears, which stood in her eyes in contrast to his daughter's whitelipped pain and indignation which could not hide a kind of sullen loathing for her stepmother. Thus victimized, Benjin was more than ordinarily sympathetic with his wife; he simply could not understand what had come over his daughter.

After Marcia had gone to bed, her father went to her room and sat beside her bed and talked to her. He was trying very hard to understand, and when he had softened his daughter sufficiently, she clung to him and sobbed. She was lonesome. Her stepmother hated her; why couldn't he understand? She was like the black man. He was lonesome, too. He had always been lonesome, all his life.

Benjin shook her. "Marcia? What are you talking about?"

She tried to explain, faltered before the look in his eyes, and was silent, retreating behind the wall of childhood into that world of her own, peopled with fantasies and strange beings sprung from her lonely imaginations.

He made another attempt, trying to be patient. "How big is he—this black man?" he asked.

"Real big—bigger than you, Daddy. And he's so strong. He makes the merry-go-round go for me. I get a ride every day."

"Is he nice?"

"He's glad to see me whenever I come. He just stays there all the time, by the merry-go-round waiting for me. He's the nicest man I ever knew, except you, Daddy. And he's going to watch over me and you, too."

"Like a guardian angel?"

"Yes, except he's black, and I guess my guardian angel's white."

It was not a very satisfying or illuminating conversation. He was very puzzled when he sought his own bed, fretting now lest his daughter's loneliness were affecting her mind.

Having made so auspicious a beginning, Mrs. Benjin could hardly contain herself until a second opportunity to punish Marcia was offered her. But that initial whipping had betrayed the violence of her hatred to the child, and Marcia walked with care. She came home to supper on time night after night, and the summer deepened toward autumn. As day followed day without overt disobedience upon which Mrs. Benjin could seize as a pretext to work her angry way with her stepdaughter, she grew irate and frustrated, and at last, one day, when

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she knew John Benjin would be remaining at his desk longer than usual, and so would not be home on time for supper, she took matters into her own hands to force the issue, and peremptorily forbade Marcia to go again to the carnival grounds.

Marcia ran away. Mrs. Benjin had known she would.

She waited with an almost unholy anticipation for the day to end.

Promptly at a quarter to six Marcia came tripping across the street and into the house, humming a little melody. She stopped short at the sight of her stepmother waiting in sultry triumph.

"You disobeyed me," said Mrs. Benjin coldly.

"What are you going to do to me?"

"I'm going to punish you. Your father said I must."

"No, please."

"Please what?"

"Please, Mother, don't."

"Yes, it's for your own good."

Mrs. Benjin could not keep herself from prolonging the child's torture. She came slowly around the table, bringing the stout whip she had held behind her gradually into sight of the child's horrified eyes.

With a shrill cry of fear, Marcia turned and fled.

Across the street, through the hole in the fence, into the carnival grounds.

But Mrs. Benjin was not so easily thwarted. She went after her, crossing the road and working her way into the grounds through that small opening in the fence, being careful to bring the whip with her, and remembering how easily some of that machinery might collapse and fall or be brought to fall on someone, a child who would know no better. . . .

She saw the child readily enough, clinging to one of the weather-beaten horses of the carousel. But Marcia was no longer afraid; she sat there with a curiously dispassionate air, watching her come on with such a sense of security from her that for a moment Mrs. Benjin was nonplussed.

As she came up to the merry-go-round her stepdaughter's voice came out at her.

"Don't! Don't touch me! Mr. Black Man won't let you. Mr. Black Man is watching over me."

Slowly, slowly, almost imperceptibly, the carousel began to move.

Mrs. Benjin, seeing only that somehow the child seemed to be escaping her, leaped forward. At the same time Marcia slipped from the back of the wooden horse, darted quickly across, and dropped off the other side of the carousel.

As Mrs. Benjin stepped up into the merry-go-round, something

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unseen took sudden hold of her.

There was one horrible scream, and then a succession of terrible sounds that mounted together with the grinding of the carousel going faster and faster. Into the gathering dusk curious oddments spun and flew from the merry-go-round, most of them spattering red upon the carousel and the earth beyond.

Marcia watched with interest and satisfaction.

When the carousel was still again, she walked around it toward the hole in the fence. There was nothing to be seen of her stepmother save some dark masses here and there. One of them lay between Marcia and her way of egress. She walked around it with almost savage detachment.

It was Mrs. Benjin's left hand, with the wedding ring still on one finger.

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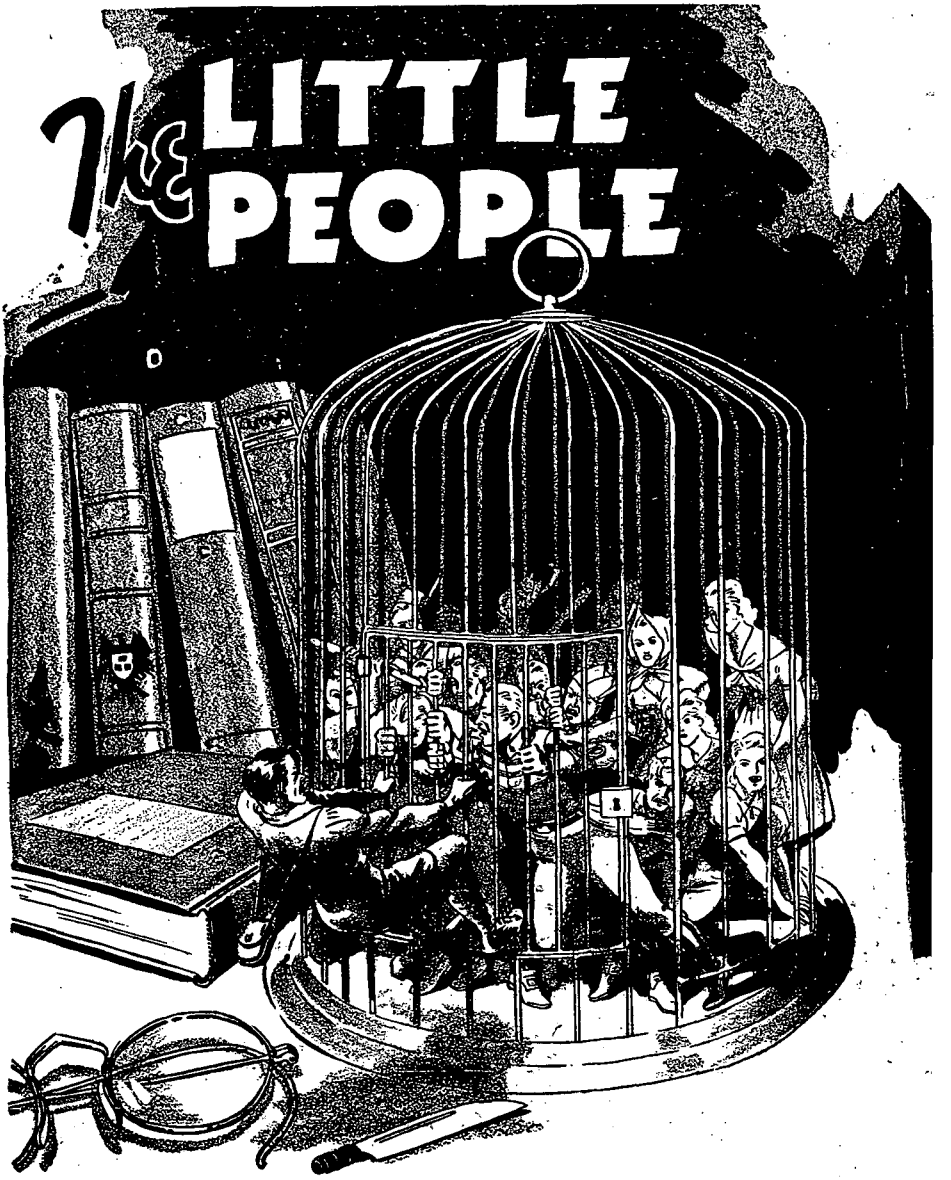
The LITTLE PEOPLE



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By EANDO BINDER

Although probably best known as the creator of "Adam Link" —one of the most popular robot characters ever to come out of the field—from time to time Eando Binder also did some fine fantasy—such as the following superb novella, which begins with a murdered cat, a purloined watch, and a burglar who stands exactly six inches tall!

THE view from the window, in line with Paul Scott's eye, included a grand sweep of the low, wooded Catskills. A chill spring sun and a morning haze combined to lend an air of mystery, enchantment. One could imagine strange things in hidden grottoes out there.

"Did you sleep well, dear?" asked Helena, his fiance, pouring a steaming cup of coffee.

"Not so well," Scott confessed, running a hand through his tousled black hair. "I'm not used to this mountain quiet, away from the city. Or else it was the rat I heard." He sniffed appreciatively at the beverage's aroma. "Mm, nothing like a cup of hot Java on a snappy morning."

"Rat?"

Dr. Asa Bolton snapped the word, the first since his gruff morning greeting. He frowned a little at his young guest. "Hasn't been any for a year, since I brought the cat. Imagination, young man."

"I don't think so," returned Scott cheerfully unruffled at the older man's scathing tone. "I heard a scurrying sound, along about three o'clock, in my room. Typically rat-like. I did imagine something, though—was sniffing around my clothes. I struck a match but saw nothing."

"Naturally. There was no rat at all." Dr. Bolton could be crusty, even insulting at times.

"Another thing," said Scott, his even disposition fading a trifle. "I heard Tommy padding around. You can't fool a cat. He was stalking prey. Later, I heard him pounce on or at something. Evidently he missed. I heard him footpad out of my room. I finally fell asleep."

"You dreamed it all." Dr. Bolton grinned coldly. "You won't enjoy your stay up here if you imagine rats, snakes and spiders like those from the city always do when they spend a few days in the country—"

"The eggs and bacon are getting cold, Dad," Helena interposed. "What a silly discussion in the

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first place, for two grown men to carry on!"

"No rat!" muttered Dr. Bolton single-mindedly. "As for Tommy—"

"By the way, where *is* Tommy?" Helena darted her eyes about in surprise. "He's usually begging around the breakfast table."

"Out hunting birds, no doubt, since there aren't any rats for him," suggested her father pointedly.

Helena left for the kitchen for more bacon, warning her fiance with a glance not to keep up the trivial argument.

Scott sighed and said nothing. Why let Dr. Bolton make his stay up here unpleasant? The elderly scientist had always been cold and scientific in attitude, and with age had become irritable. He was sharp-featured, wore pince-nez, and a goatee. It was his yearly custom to spend the spring and summer months in this isolated region, filling out his notes on biological research done in the city.

Helena, was sweet, on the other hand. She made up for her father. Scott allowed himself to glow. There would be quiet tramps in the woods with her, views from the higher knolls. A communion with nature and with the sense of mysterious things that lay over this wild land. Scott was the opposite of the scientist, in nature. He hoped to write a book up here.

His thoughts were interrupted by a sharp scream. It was from Helena, in the kitchen.

Scott dashed there. Helena was standing in the further doorway, looking down on the steps leading to the cellar of the old, ramshackle house.

"What is it, Helena? What—"

Scott, beside her, followed her pointing finger. The big, lean cat—Tommy—lay on the third step, dead. Clotted blood soaked its tan-mottled fur. Scott stepped down, kneeled, and raised the head by one ear. The throat was torn out. Scott stared, looking closer. Torn out? It almost looked as though—but no, that must be sheer imagination.

Who or what would cut a cat's throat?

"So it *is* a rat!" Dr. Bolton's voice was enraged, at this collapse of his previous stand. "And a big one, to get Tommy like that. Well, I'll get *him!* Helena, where are those rat-traps? No, never mind, I'll find them myself. Get out you two. Get out."

They left the fuming man, realizing his raw temper had been salted by the incident.

Scott enjoyed the hike he and Helena took. Hand in hand they struggled up a bald peak and looked down over rolling hills, that faded into dim distance. It

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was quiet, sylvan, and again—mysterious.

"Who knows what queer things lie hidden beyond the sight of mortal man?" Scott mused, half smiling at himself.

"Washington Irving found that sort of inspiration here," agreed the girl in their mutual mood. "The Headless Horseman, Rip Van Winkle, the ghost crew of Hendrik Hudson—"

They laughed, then, and ran down the hill. They made a day of it, munching on sandwiches Helena had brought. When they returned to the isolated house, Dr. Bolton was gruffly pleasant. Before bedtime he pointed out the three rat traps he had placed in strategic places, baited with raw bacon. They were the spring type, effective against uneducated country rats.

"I'll get him!" the scientist muttered as though it were his only purpose in life.

Scott was awakened from a sound sleep by the pistol-like snap of a trap, in the middle of the night. He smiled at the thought of what Dr. Bolton's triumph would be, in the morning, and turned on his other side. But he was awakened again by a snap, a few minutes later. And then a third. All three traps had sprung. Three rats? Strange, in such quick succession. But Scott was too tired to puzzle over that.

In the morning, Dr. Bolton appeared at the breakfast table with a frown over his sharp, alert features.

Not noticing, Scott asked: "How many rats were caught—three?"

"Three?" The scientist's goatee fairly bristled. "*None!* And I don't appreciate the humor of *this,* Paul Scott!"

He thrust out a torn bit of brown wrapping paper. Scott read the three scrawly words: "Can't catch me!"

"I found it in the third sprung trap," raged Dr. Bolton. "You deliberately sneaked down in the middle of the night, Scott—"

"Dad!" Helena's tone was shocked. "You can't believe Paul did it—"

"Then who did?" snapped Dr. Bolton. "An intelligent rat that writes notes?"

Scott and the girl looked at each other, wonderingly.

"It must have been an intruder," Helena stammered uncertainly. "A—a tramp!"

"With the doors locked, and no ground floor windows open?" Dr. Bolton glared at Scott. "I won't have a practical joker in my house! Helen will drive you to the station. You can catch the next train at—"

With studied calm, he reached for his vest-pocket watch. His face grew apoplectic, after he had fumbled a moment.

"It's gone! My gold watch!"

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Chapter 2
Battle in the Moonlight

Young Atho looked down over the slope from his concealed vantage. Bright moonlight shafted down between the tall trees. The merrymakers gamboled over the grassy space, chatting and laughing and dancing. He knew them all, of course, the young people around his age of twenty summers. It was the Full Moon Festival, gayest of them all.

His eyes lighted. There was lovely Elva, fairest of the girls. She danced in a direct, argent beam from above. Her white downy robe flowed about her shapely limbs. Her long, night-black hair streamed as she whirled with a grace no wild creature could match. Yes, she was lovely and perfect. Atho's pulses throbbed.

Then he frowned a little. He saw Koro. He was sitting there, hugging his knees, gazing raptly at the pirouetting figure. Was she dancing for him? Atho hated the thought.

Then he glowed within. He had waited for the right moment, the height of the merriment. Now was the time . . . .

He sprang up, in full view, in a sharp moonbeam that limelighted him as though on a stage. One arm aloft, he shouted.

"Eyoooo!"

His young clarion voice carried down the wind, startling the merrymakers. The dancing stopped and a hundred faces turned toward him. Some of the more timid darted for shadows, for one never knew what danger lurked in the wild. Several of the young men leaped for their bows and spears.

Then one call came back in recognition. "It's Atho! He's returned. Eyooo. Atho!"

They all knew him then. "Come down, Atho! Eyoo, Atho! What have you brought?" It was a mixed chorus.

Atho leaped high into the air, in pure exuberance, reversing his heels about one another a half dozen times before he landed. Then he yelled back:

"I have come back. And I have brought with me a great prize!"

"What is it? Let us see, Atho!"

The crowd now streamed up the slope toward him. Atho folded his arms, head held high, waiting till they had gathered in a semi-circle before him. He waited a little longer till Elva had struggled to the front, eagerly. Her dark, wondrous eyes met his, and only then did Atho move. Again he leaped high, his strong lithe body a study of animal grace.

"Show us, Atho! Please, Atho—" They were craning their necks, trying to see into the thicket behind him.

Atho strode to it and stooped, knowing all eyes were on him. He

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turned around with a burden in his arms. He set it at his feet, leaning it against his thigh. It was huge and round, almost half as high as he was. Both sides were flat and smoothly metallic, reflecting the moonlight in a burnished golden blaze.

"It is of gold!" said an excited voice from the group.

"But what is it?" queried another.

Atho waved a hand for attention, as the murmurs grew. Holding with one hand the large handle with which it was equipped, he pressed with his other fist on a protruding knob. Some of the girls shrieked as one whole side of the object fell away, on a hinge. Revealed was a shiny glass dial, and behind it black numbers on a circular white plate, with two metal hands slowly moving around. And they noticed now, in the hush that came over them, that the large object made a beating sound, like a machine.

"It is what the Big People call a 'gold watch'," Atho informed them, using the alien accent and words. "It tells them the time, perhaps more accurately than our sun-dials."

Atho stood proudly. Their admiration was for him as well as the amazing prize. He had carried that great, ponderous thing on his back for miles and miles.

No mean feat, for Atho of the Little Folk was just six inches high.

"Where did you find it?"

"How did you get it?"

"How did you dare take such a great thing from the Big People?"

"Tell us the story, Atho!"

Atho's chest expanded and his eyes sparkled with achievement.

"It was easy. I went to the house that sits alone beyond Bald Mountain. There were three Big People in it. And a clawed-one; they call it a 'cat.' It is a fierce, quick beast. It can see in the dark, like we can. It stalked me the first night, as I looked for something worthy to take. It pounced at me once. It was almost as quick as I, but I ran and hid in a garment on a chair. The cat could not wind me, because of the garment's man-odor. The man must have heard. He lighted a torch, looking, then went back to sleep, breathing in the roaring way they do. Thus I escaped an encounter with the cat at that time, but when I left my hiding, it stalked me again."

A child of nature, Atho was demonstrating with pantomine. He went around in a circle on all fours, lifting his hands and his feet carefully, to represent the cat.

"I saw I would have to deal with the cat, or give up my venture. It had stalked me to a dark place on steps leading down. I crouched

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low, against the wood. When it sensed me, its tail switched, and it leaped. I could barely see its monstrous claws sweeping toward me, for there was little light. But I was ready. With a lightning stroke, I hurled my lance into its throat. While it clawed at the spear, I darted close and cut its throat open with my flint axe."

Atho made a violent arm motion, with an invisible axe.

"It died quickly, and the cat's death was a mystery to the Big People in the morning. I heard their rumbling speech. They spoke of traps. During that day, scouting around, I saw what I wanted—the gold watch, in the older man's garment. I got it at night, when he had undressed. Then, before I left, I sprang the three traps with the butt of my spear! They made noises like thunder, but they caught only the wind! The Big Ones thought they were trapping a brainless creature called a rat!"

At this, the Little Folk laughed. And then, as though at a cue, they chorused out:

"The Big Ones are clumsy and witless
We are so clever and spry,
They never will, never will catch us,
Not to the day we die!"

It was an age-old chant, born in a dim past. It was a chant of pathetic defiance, for the Little Folk lived in the shadow of a world dominated by the Big Ones. It was a chant of time-worn frustration, a rune of pitiful pride, never rendered to the Big Ones' ears.

Atho had drunk to the full of the moment. It was not often that one of the young men returned from a jaunt among the habitations of the Big Ones with such a remarkable prize.

But all the while Atho had watched Elva. Her reaction seemed strangely aloof. Almost, her eyes seemed to scorn him. He had hoped to move her most. He had, in fact, fulfilled his dangerous mission only to enlarge himself in her regard.

Yet there she stood, indifferently. Beside her, dark-faced Koro looked on sulkily. Atho well knew that *he* begrudged the triumph of the gold watch. Koro had long been his rival for the affections of Elva, since she had entered womanhood.

Atho felt a sickening drop in his elation. In the time of his absence, had Koro perhaps swung the scales in his own favor? But no. The ribbon of bethrothal did not gleam in Elva's silk-black hair. She was still free. And Atho felt a quick upsurge of spirit. He had yet one more thing to tell. Surely it would stir her from that calm.

He held up his hand.

"I did one other thing," he

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spoke. "In one of the traps I left a message, written on a piece of their own writing skin, with one of their own writing sticks. I wrote—'can't catch me!"

Atho waited with a pleased anticipation for the roar of delight from his audience. But it did not come. Instead, there was a concert of gasps.

"But that is against the First Law!" said one voice. It was Koro, who had stepped forward. "The First Law says we must have no direct traffic with the Big People!"

Atho was taken aback.

"The message was not a communication," he objected. "Nor did I reveal myself. I did not violate the First Law."

"The Elders might think otherwise!" Koro replied pointedly.

The eyes of the two young men clashed. Atho trembled. He had often felt he must fight Koro. But he relaxed. It was the Second Law never to fight among themselves.

"Let us not tell the Elders!" rang out a voice from the group. "Atho meant no wrong!"

The thought struck instant reception. "We will not tell the Elders! We will keep it a secret! Atho is daring and brave! Let us all dance!"

Joining hands like happy children, they formed a huge ring around Atho as he hoisted the gold watch to his shoulders and strode down the slope. Beyond the ring, those with reed-flutes and three-stringed lyres resumed their music-making. There was no thought of rhythm or melody. It was free, wild, Pan-like, yet unconsciously harmonious. A human ear would have found the pipings and flutings strangely sweet and soothing, in tune with nature.

Atho deposited his burden at the end of the glade, among a heap of other articles spirited away from the Big People. Rings, strings of beads, silver coins, pins, needles, even a box of matches lay there. Atho noticed with pride that his gold watch stood out among them both in size and resplendence.

They were thieves, the Little Folk, but only in principle. It was not the thought of wealth, which meant nothing to them. It was the thrill of outwitting the Big Ones, slipping their most prized baubles from under their very noses, as children love to hide things from their elders.

Atho turned now and sought Elva, after putting down his weapons. The ring had broken up in separate cavorting groups. Other girls danced across his path, invitingly, but Atho smilingly brushed them aside. He would dance only with Elva tonight. He saw her at last, standing at the edge of the glade, conversing with the ever-present Koro.

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She turned quickly at his approach, her eyes full upon him, and Atho hoped it meant she had been waiting for him to seek her out. Koro turned, frowning.

Their eyes clashed again.

"Well, Atho the mighty!" greeted Koro with the mockery of envy. "Let us hear more of your boasting. Perhaps, in your modesty, you did not tell of a Big One you slew!"

"With your tongue as a sharper weapon than my spear, I might have," retorted Atho. To Elva he said, more softly: "I would like to converse with you—alone."

"Alone?" Elva drawled. "But there is much dancing going on. Why miss any of it?"

Atho didn't know if she was serious or teasing. "Just for a minute or two," he said.

"Elva is about to dance with me," Koro asserted, grasping the girl's hand possessively.

She jerked it free. "I do not like that, Koro!" she flared. "And I will converse with you, Atho—alone,"

Koro fell back at the sudden rebuff. Grinning, Atho led the girl away, under the shadow of a fern which loomed like a tree. The music and sound of light shuffling feet faded into the background of forest silence.

Atho stood awkwardly silent for a moment, leaning against a toadstool. Though in the eyes of the Big Ones Atho might seem tiny and insignificant, he was, in proportion, a miniature Hercules. Great wide shoulders and a broad chest narrowed down to the flat waist of an athletic body. The arms and legs rippled with smooth, deceptive muscles. He was bare except for a light, spider-silk shirt, and trunks of moleskin upheld by a belt of snake-hide.

His features were regular and weather-tanned. Keen blue eyes peered beneath a mane of nut-brown hair cut low. His rugged jaw and straight lips spoke of one who had never blanched before danger. Yet now, before the beauteous Elva, he seemed to have lost even the courage to speak.

"Did you miss me while I was gone?" he asked finally.

"We all missed you," the girl said, plucking a blade of grass and twining it about her arm.

"You are cool to me, Elva." Atho grunted. "I brought the gold watch back only for you."

"I cannot use it!" Elva's laughter tinkled. "And as Koro said, you are quite a braggart about it!"

"But I do not mean to be," protested Atho. "Elva, you are unfair. You know the exploit is as much a pleasure to all of us, as to I who accomplished it. We all enjoy such a coup against the Big People—"

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"Yes. I know." The girl was suddenly serious. "Those Big Ones are frightful, aren't they, Atho? I've never seen one. What sort of monsters are they?"

"Monsters?" Atho, who had been among them more than once, was thoughtful. "No, not monsters, Elva. We were told that as children so that we would be properly afraid of being seen by them. They are much like us, only twelve times as tall and bigger. They are like us in other things. They eat and laugh and dance and—love!"

Elva's eyes were round in wonder. She had many misconceptions of the Big People. "You mean they can be tender toward one another?"

Atho nodded solemnly.

"Yes, that I know, for I saw two of them, man and woman, together. They sat at the summit of Bald Mountain. I had gone out to hunt, as I did not like their strange food, some of which I tried. They sat arm in arm, and the man whispered to the girl—"

Sudden inspiration lanced in Atho's mind. "He said to the girl that she was the loveliest creature in all the universe. The 'universe' is their word meaning all the worlds beyond the sky if there are such. But he was wrong. For you, Elva—you are the loveliest creature in all the universe!"

Elva blushed. She stood in a pattern of intermittent moonlight streaming down through the fern fronds. With her black, moon-gilded hair, warm brown eyes, and slim rounded figure, she was close to being that ultimate paragon, at least in Atho's eyes.

Atho felt that now the moment of moments had arrived. His arms slipped about her. She was rigid for a moment, then yielded to the embrace. She turned her face up, like a beautiful flower, and her rosy lips were an invitation. . . .

Atho never completed the kiss. His quick ears caught the pad of slinking feet. He swung the girl behind him, darting his eyes into the black shadows of a thicket nearby. Two red, ferocious eyes pierced back. And then silently, sharp teeth gleaming, a ferret sprang forth at the two lone figures. A tiny beast to normal humans, but to the Little Folk it represented a monster, nearly twice as large as they.

There was no chance to call for help from the others. Atho cursed himself for having slipped so far from the glade, where the killer would never have dared come. For the Little Folk, in numbers, were no easy prey, as the wild forest hunters well knew.

Atho had instinctively reached back of his shoulder for his slung spear, then remembered he had left his weapons beside the pile of trinkets in the glade. He was unarmed! In flashing thought, he

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realized there was only one thing to do.

First, with a quick shove, he pushed Elva behind the toadstool, where she would be safe from any direct onslaught.

"Don't move!" he warned her.

She nodded in understanding. The Little People did not lose their heads in danger, they who knew of it every day of their lives. But she managed to encourage with her eyes.

All this had taken but a second. The Little Folk, a dozen times smaller than the Big Ones, were also a dozen times quicker, by the compensations of not-unkind nature. As quick, in fact, as any comparably-sized creatures of the forest.

The deadly ferret had scuttled half-way across the intervening space. Atho did not wait. He charged forward himself and from his throat issued a challenging cry:

"Eyooo! One of us will taste blood, my friend! Eyoooo!"

Then he had no more breath to waste. His little feet pattered over moss, and his body tensed forward in a running crouch. The ferret loomed horse-size, beady eyes glittering. Its head snapped to crunch its victim, as they almost met.

But its intended victim twisted aside at the last split-second. Atho's very maneuver of rushing forward disconcerted the plunge of the ferret, who usually caught a creature running away, or half paralyzed in fright.

Atho grinned as he sidestepped, with a quickness that was almost a blur of motion. The Little Folk had one great advantage over their natural enemies—intelligence. Atho would use that factor.

The ferret turned, quick as a snake. For a moment it hesitated, eyeing the still, crouching form of Elva and debating whether that might not be the easier possibility.

Atho saw, and dashed forward again, forcing the ferret to choose him. It darted forward. Atho dug his heels into the moss, stopped short, and slipped sideways again. The ferret's teeth scraped his thigh. When it turned, Atho was dancing a foot away, tauntingly. Three more times the ferret charged, in as many seconds. Atho was always beyond its nose.

Atho was breathing easily despite his exertions, but realized the game could not continue forever. One crunch of those ruthless teeth and he would be badly wounded. At the next charge of the beast, Atho waited till the last instant and then leaped straight up. His body twisted in mid-air.

When he came down, he was straddling the furry back of the ferret.

Elva, trembling and moaning

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behind the toadstool, gave him up for lost. Never before had this been heard of, leaping on the back of a killer-beast. Atho would be tossed off, thrown to the ground, and would be lying at the mercy of those formidable jaws. Almost. Elva darted out, to at least die with the young warrior.

Then she saw an amazing thing.

Atho's plan was instinctive. He wrapped his legs around the ferret's neck, hanging tight so that its furious hunching did not shake him loose. Then, when the head turned on its supple neck to snap at his legs, Atho's hands darted forth. He grasped the snout in one hand, the lower jaw in the other. The muscles of his shoulders and arms became whipcord, as he pried apart.

In proportion to his size, Atho was far stronger than any six-foot man, by another rule of fair-minded nature. He wrenched the jaws apart with his powerful little arms. The ferret screamed in agony. And there was a sharp snap.

Atho leaped off and kicked the beast in the side. It slunk away, with its lower jaw hanging limp and broken. Panting and laughing both, Atho strode back toward Elva.

"Eyoo!" he cried. "That beast will think twice again before attacking the Little Folk!"

Elva had arisen and threw herself headlong into his arms.

"You are"—she sought a word —"wonderful! You fought for me, Atho?"

"For you!" he agreed, bending his head.

But again their kiss was interrupted. Koro stepped from behind a fern stem, a spear balanced lightly in his hand.

"I heard the commotion and came running, with this spear," he stated. "Were you attacked? Where—" He looked about, as though for an enemy.

Atho stared coldly. "For one who came running, your breath is remarkably quiet. Were you perhaps waiting behind that fern, to use your spear *after* I had been killed?"

"Koro!" Elva's voice was shocked. "Were you eavesdropping all the time we were here?"

Koro shrugged off the accusations. "Come, why quarrel on Festival Eve? Let us join the others."

Atho conquered rage at Koro's planned interference. Atho was satisfied. His courtship of Elva had passed into a more intimate phase, what with the bringing of the gold watch and the battle for her protection. No need now to hurry their relationship, despite Koro and his methods.

They joined the frolic in the glade. To the tinkling of gold-spun cymbals and the fluting of snail-shell horns, they danced.

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And never had Atho's limbs felt so light; or Elva swayed so bewitchingly, as they gazed in each other's eyes.

Chapter 3
Atho's Sentence

A clarion horn sounded suddenly, loud and clear, and the dancing stopped. It was the ceremony signal.

Now, from all the surrounding region for a mile, the Little Folk emerged from their homes. The older ones, and children, and mothers with babes in arms—all congregated in the glade, where the previous dancing among the young ones had only been the start of the Full Moon Festival. The homes they came from were the hollowed-out interiors of stumps, and windfalls, and briarpatches growing thick over underground warrens. It happened at rare times that one of the Big People wandered through their camouflaged village, little realizing that around him were the Little Folk, lying hidden with bated breath.

Now the total population gathered in the moonlit glade, perhaps a thousand in all. Around the edges of the assemblage the appointed guards stationed themselves, armed with bows, spears and flint-maces. A hush settled as the Elders approached, the twelve oldest and wisest. Wrinkled, stooped, long-bearded like gnomes, hobbling slowly, they made their way to the center, where an altar of bright stones had been quickly erected.

It was a fairy scene, known to mankind's history, but never really believed.*

The ceremony began.

"Oh Spirit of Life," began one of the Elders, "make us fleet as the wind!"

"Fleet as the wind!" chanted the assemblage in full-throated chorus.

"Make us strong as the trees!"

"Strong as the trees!"

On and on the echoed invocation went, a chant older than any writing known in the outside world. It ended with the line:

"Protect us from the Big Ones!"

This keynote of the brief ceremony rolled plaintively through the silent night forest. Once a month it trilled into the sky, under the light of the benign moon, as it had for countless full moons before.

* The persistent legends of all races of the existence of such creatures as fairies, gnomes, dwarfs, and similar little people indicate that a great basis of fact must certainly underlie them. No more romantic stories have ever been told than these legends of little people. That such a race exists, or has existed, can hardly be doubted. Nor can it be reasonably said that they do not exist today. It reality, the world is still a vast unexplored place, wherein many strange things exist, unknown to man: How else can we explain many of the mysterious things we all can relate as true experiences? How else explain some of the mysteries revealed by the late Charles Fort? Perhaps someday concrete evidence of the existence of a race of little people will be revealed.—Ed.

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That was all. Then, because the Little Folk were by nature happy creatures of the wild, bowed heads raised and the festivities assumed full swing. Honey, the nectar of flowers, sweet herbs, luscious nut-meat, and the soft flesh of insects passed freely. Nothing was cooked, for they ate of the freshest and sweetest of nature's bounty.

Later, another little ceremony occurred, indulged by the Elders. The heaped trinkets stolen from the Big People were raised aloft by willing hands and paraded all around the glade, sparkling in the moonlight. Atho, with his gold watch, marched at the head proudly. Voices, young and old, chimed out:

"The Big Ones are clumsy and witless,
We are so clever and spry,
They never will, never will catch us,
Not to the day we die!"

And Atho was allowed the privilege, at the end, of striking a match.

Grasping the matchstick, sword-sized to him, he scraped the knobbed end against the box-stretcher, then held it aloft as a flaming torch. The Little Folk used fire, in the bitterness of winter for heat, but knew nothing of the science behind the making of matches. In many ways, the Big People had mystifying things in their civilization, little of which the tiny forest people knew or cared about.

The flame was not allowed to burn more than a few seconds. It might attract night birds of prey. Atho extinguished it in a conch-shell of water, placed at hand.

Atho felt glowingly happy. Elva was radiant beside him. Then a voice spoke in Atho's ear, startling him.

It was the old, venerable Zutho, of the Elders. The two young people bobbed their heads respectfully.

"You are back, young Atho," greeted Zutho. "And I have heard you brought the gold watch."

"Yes, Father," exulted Atho. "I took it from under their very noses!" He told the story briefly.

"A brave but foolish deed!" Zutho shook his head. "What madness has come upon this generation? This mingling and sneaking among the Big People is dangerous. It might lead to disaster for all of us. We Elders have thought seriously at times of forbidding any further of such exploits! In my time, youngsters were content to show their prowess by hunting a killer-beast and dragging its head back. Why must you, nowadays, scurry about under the feet of the Big Ones?"

Atho smiled.

"In your time, you avoided such exploits?" he queried. "Who

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was it taught me many words of the Big People's language, and their writing? Who was it, in his youth, who spent much time—a year perhaps—listening to their talk and examining their writings? And who was it imitated so many of their achievements, their knowledge, even occasionally their clothes? Who was it, Father?"

Old Zutho coughed a little, and sighed, in memory.

"Yes, my son, it was I. It is true that many of the things of the Big Ones are good. And I cannot blame you for the gold watch. The fire of youth burns strong. And those exploits are our only way of showing defiance, even if secret, of the shadow of the Big Ones over our lives and freedom. Still, it is dangerous. We Elders ask only that you young people remember that, every second of your lives."

A knot of young people had gathered around, to hear. They nodded solemnly.

Zutho went on, somewhat garrulously.

"For ages, the only way we Little Folk have survived is to keep out of their knowledge. At times, in our dim history, we tried traffic with them. But the last time was so long ago that even in the recordings of the Big People it is fable. For every such venture meant disaster. We were called evil little beings. Or else we were displayed for the sport and enjoyment of the Big Ones. Our communities were sought out, destroyed. We were enslaved. There can only be one race ruling Earth.

"And so, we must be wisely content to exist in widely isolated little communities here and there on Earth. The First Law has been engraved in our policy for thousands of years—never to have traffic with the Big Ones.

"Remember that today, despite our song they are not so clumsy and witless. Or superstitious about us, which used to be our race's best protection. Finding us, they would likely not destroy us. But we would have a worse fate—slavery. They would study us, and train us, and *breed* us—all for purposes of their own. Our free, wild, reasonably happy life beyond their knowledge would be gone."

The group listening had heard a similar lesson from babyhood on, but it always struck a new, chill note in their hearts. Atho hung his head. His gold watch exploit did not seem so wonderful now.

But old Zutho smiled then.

"I did not mean to be harsh, Atho. The ruling Elders of our race, in succession, have never wanted to make our restricted life any more limited than necessary. The gathering of trinkets is harmless sport, so long as you are cautious and do not violate the First

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Law. And I'm sure you, Atho, haven't violated that principle."

It was not a question, merely a statement. But it hung in the air. The young people shot guarded glances at one another, remembering the note Atho had dared write.

Atho himself stood for a moment dumbly. Could he keep such a rankling secret? But he knew it was not in his nature to be dishonest. Better to tell now and have it over with. He opened his mouth to speak, looking up at Zutho with sudden resolve . . . .

Another voice sounded first.

"Father! Atho did violate the First Law. He wrote a note to the Big People! It is my duty to tell it!"

It was Koro's voice, ringing out loudly and self-righteously.

The young people around Koro shrank away from him, darting glances of disgust.

"What is this?" demanded Zutho. "Atho, is it true?"

Atho flushed deeply. "It is true." He told of the note.

Old Zutho sighed in relief. "No harm was done," he commented. Then his voice crackled angrily. "But it is an offense against the principle of the First Law. You will have to be punished, Atho, as a lesson to others!"

The other Elders came up, as a boy was sent to get them. In the meantime, whispers had gone around the glade. The entire population gathered about. Atho stood shame-faced, wishing he had never set eyes on the gold watch.

Zutho turned from the group of Elders, his wrinkled old face grave.

"Actual violation of the First Law would merit death," he spoke. "But you had no intentions of communication with the Big People. Therefore, your punishment will be light. One year of woman-status! For one year you will be barred from men's work and status. You will not hunt or gather food. You cannot marry. You will work with women, washing and cleaning and preparing food. And for that year you will be barred also from the Full Moon Festivals!"

A year of woman-status! Atho gasped. For a year he must be an object of scorn and pity, doing woman's work, denied his rightful place as a male! All for writing three little words on a piece of paper for the Big People to read as a taunt!

"It seems heavy punishment, I know," added Zutho. But remember, Atho, that in writing those three words, giving the Big People a clue to our existence if not location, you endangered the lives and liberty of our entire community!"

Atho's first bitterness dissolved to resignation. He nodded hum-

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bly and took a backward step.

Old Zutho was shaking his head sorrowfully. "If only you had told me yourself, Atho! That is more disappointing to me than the deed itself."

Atho made no attempt to insist he had been on the verge of telling. It would sound false. He saw the triumph now, in Koro's eyes. How meanly he had plotted to interrupt Atho's courtship of Elva! And would Elva wait a year?

His eyes asked her that. And her eyes, in return, seemed to say yes. Atho felt some uplift of a leaden spirit.

Then he heard a whisper in his ear. Koro had sidled up.

"With you out of the way for a year, as a rival, Elva will be mine! I am going to the Big People and bring back a prize beside which your gold watch will be trifling!"

Burning words came to Atho's tongue, but he had no chance to answer.

A shout of alarm went up, suddenly, from the alert guards.

A huge shadow passed athwart the glade, in the shape of a winged creature. A thousand pairs of eyes looked up fearfully. It was one of their most dreaded nocturnal enemies—the great owl. Almost silently it swooped down, as big—to the Little Folk—as a giant airplane.

Yet for all of its unexpectedness, the Little Folk were not panic-stricken. They melted away into the protecting thickets, quicker in their flight than the owl was in its lumbering plunge. The Elders were carried away by strong young arms. Yet a few stragglers were endangered.

The twang of spider-silk bowstrings sounded as the armed men loosed a barrage of agate-tipped arrows of bone. Lodging in the bird's heavy plumage, they did no harm. The owl's eye was its only vulnerable spot.

All of the stragglers reached the safety of the glade's thicket-edges, where the great owl could not pursue. All but one. A young girl had stumbled, fallen, and lay stunned. The killer-bird swooped down over this easy prey. Still no arrows had taken effect. A groan went up from the watching people. The girl was struggling to her knees, but now the huge bird was close . . . .

At the moment the alarm had sounded, Atho had grasped Elva's hand and pulled her into the thickets. Now turning, he saw the plight of the little girl. He snatched a long wooden spear from a guard's hand and leaped out into the glade again, seconds before other armed men saw and attempted to run to the rescue. The killer-bird's claws had already encircled its victim and its wings beat to rise, as Atho stopped to cast.

He was twenty-five feet from

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the owl. In the scale of measurement used by man, it was a distance of three hundred feet in proportion to his height. He leaned back on one heel, tipping the spear rearward in his right arm till its butt touched the ground. All his muscles froze into the rigidity of contraction. His flint-blue eyes fixed themselves on his far target, calculatingly. Every nerve and fiber of him centered on the aim.

Then he flung the spear forward with all the impetus of his arched body. It sailed through the moonlight with a deadly whine and buried itself for half its length in the owl's right eye.

With a raucous scream, the great bird released its burden and flapped erratically away. It blundered into a tree trunk and fell to the ground. When some of the guards had arrived, its wings were stretching in the rigidity of death. Atho's cast, one long to be remembered, had pierced its brain. Armed men remained, to ward off scavengers. Later, the bird would be stripped of its feathers, skin-fat and sharp claws, all useful to the Little Folk.

Out in the glade, the Little Folk reappeared, laughing and dancing again. Even the little girl so near doom was smiling and continuing her gorging on honey and flower petals. The Festival would be no less merry for the tense episode. It made no difference. Their lives were geared to quick danger, quick battle, quick forgetfulness.

Nor did it make any difference to Atho. There was no mention, nor did he expect any, of a change in his sentence. Yet for many a long winter, mothers would tell their children of the mighty cast of Atho, killing an owl single-handed.

The sounds of merriment in the glade faded behind Atho, as he was let away by Zutho. His sentence would begin immediately, and the rest of the Festival Eve he would spend laboring. Atho felt grimly amused over his own situation. He had this night brought the gold watch, almost won Elva, defeated a ferret with bare hands, and killed an owl. It should be a night of triumph. Instead, he was beginning a year's sentence of woman-status for meddling with the Big People!

Thought of the gold watch brought remembrance of Koro, and his boast of bringing back a greater prize . . . .

Chapter 4
Venture Among the Big People

Paul Scott awoke and raised his head from the pillow.

The sound he had heard continued, a scrape of leather, clearly audible in the utterly quiet house. It came from the hall, where he remembered now that

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he had left his binoculars, in their case, on the floor. Was the mysterious intruder back, the one who had stolen Dr. Bolton's gold watch, a week ago? It was the conclusion they had come to, after much perplexed conjecture—and argument.

Reaching his hand under the pillow and gripping the pistol there, Scott climbed from his bed and tip-toed to the open door. Listening for a moment, he heard the noises louder now, from the hall. He could see nothing in the pitch darkness, but abruptly the noises ceased.

And Scott had the weird feeling that eyes were upon him. The hairs of his neck stiffened. Then the noise resumed—a quick tug, a metallic scrape, and a patter of quick footsteps!

Scott groped frantically for the hall switch, found it, and snapped it on. Light almost blinded him.

"Stop, or I'll shoot!" he said hoarsely, waving his gun at chest height. Before he finished he saw that there was no intruder in the hall—at least on a level with his eye.

Then he glanced down, thinking of his binoculars. An incredulous gasp ripped from his throat.

There they were, and they seemed to be running away by themselves, the neck-cord dragging! He confusedly made out little legs. Suddenly the binoculars clattered to the floor, half way to the back door. Something small and squirming had tangled in the twists of the cord. It fell and lay quiet, as though stunned.

It took Scott several seconds to believe what his eyes saw. They were dazzled both by the light and incredulity. He stood paralyzed, with no thought of aiming his gun or even moving.

When he did move, finally, someone else moved before him. It was Dr. Bolton, emerging from his bedroom, directly in front of where the binoculars had fallen. The scientist clutched the little form, just as it recovered and attempted to jump away. He held it up, before their eyes.

"Paul—Dad—what happened—"

Helena had slipped from her bedroom and come up behind Scott. Her eyes fastened to what her father held, and slowly widened.

"Why, it's—*it's a little man!*" she whispered, and for a while no other word was said. Their three pairs of eyes slowly convinced their skeptical brains that it was just that.

"Well, there it is, Dr. Bolton," said Scott finally, with a calmness he did not feel. "Our 'rat,' and 'intruder.' It was trying to carry off my binoculars. Its feet tangled in the cord and it fell. It accounts also for the note in the trap, and for the disappearance of your gold watch. It, or

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another of the—Little Folk."

"Little Folk!" echoed Dr. Bolton dazedly.

"Yes," mused Scott, the first shock of surprise over "I'm enough of a student of mythology to believe the Little Folk once existed—and apparently still do! Or call them elves, sprites, fairies, pixies, peri, kobolds—anything you will. Different times had different names for them. They have kept out of man's sight, living in woodland. There might very likely be a community of them in some hidden grotto in these Catskills, as the original Dutch settlers firmly believed, over a hundred years ago."

"Elves, fairies, pixies—Dr. Bolton was shaking his head, as though unwilling to accept that explanation. "It's perfectly proportioned, like a human being. Do you suppose it's intelligent and can understand—"

He was suddenly shaking the small form in his hand. "Do you understand our language, little man?" he demanded. "Who are you? What are you—"

Helena clutched her father's arm. "Don't, Dad! You're frightening him half to death. Poor little creature, look how he's trembling."

"You'll never get an answer out of him that way," said Scott, a little angrily, at the scientist's roughness. "Here—set him on this table and give him a chance to get over his fright. Probably just the sight of us is enough to scare him witless."

Dr. Bolton complied, placing the tiny figure on the nearby hall table, under the glow of a lamp. Now they saw clearly that it was a human-proportioned mannikin, six inches high, dressed in a queer, abbreviated costume. Its skin was tanned by outdoor life. It looked like a bronzed little statuette, exquisitely carved. They watched it breathlessly, as it slowly raised on one elbow, peering around. Its little chin quivered. Its tiny eyes shone with fear.

Scott bent his head over it. He spoke gently. "Don't be afraid, little man. We won't harm you. Do you understand me? Are you one of a community of little folk like yourself?"

The small figure relaxed a little, at the soft, soothing tones. Then, to their startled surprise, it nodded.

Scott went on excitedly, but still softly. "Can you speak our language? What is your name?"

Koro's rapidly beating heart eased now, his first fright over, at being caught by the Big People. This wasn't so bad. They weren't going to harm him. He had understood their words, most of them. In common with many of the younger folk, he had learned the Big People's tongue from old

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Zutho. It had been great sport, for a while, to speak to each other in their language, and even pretend at times they were the Big Ones.

Koro was thinking rapidly. He must escape. But for the present, they were watchful. He must lull them, and await his chance. In the meantime, why not talk with them? He felt a sudden surge of wild daring. Yes, why not? It was something no other of the Little Folk had done.

He stood up, looking at them.

"I—am—Koro," he said haltingly. He yelled, knowing they had dull ears. "Koro—of—the—Little—Folk!"

To Scott and his companions, the little man's voice was a high-pitched piping, as though a chirping bird had learned to talk. They looked at one another in breathless wonder. Even now they could hardly believe it was true.

"He speaks our language!" Helena said in awe. "Isn't it amazing?"

"Koro, of the Little Folk!" Scott murmured. "'Once Upon a Time,'" he quoted, "'when fairies lived on Earth'—and they still do!"

"What a discovery!" Dr. Bolton suddenly burst out, his scientific instincts alert. "What a find! You can call them fairies, if you want, but do you know what this means—scientifically? An unsuspected race of little creatures with intelligence! Little men with human minds! It's unprecedented. I must study them—"

He suddenly bent over the tiny captive. "How many of your people are there? Where do you live?"

Koro shrank back. The First Law rose screamingly in his mind—never to have traffic with the Big People! He must not tell them. He shook his head violently, trembling.

Scott nodded, intuitively realizing what it meant.

"He won't tell you that, Dr. Bolton. The Little Folk keep out of our way, and I can see why. Would we give such information to seventy-foot giants? We caught this little fellow by sheer accident. You wouldn't get him to betray his people for love or money?"

"Money—my gold watch—bright things!" Dr. Bolton muttered, in rapid thought. He darted into his bedroom and returned with items which he heaped before the little man—several coins, a pearl-handled penknife, a ring of keys, and his wristwatch.

"Look, Koro—all yours! And the binoculars, too, since you wanted them." He used a wheedling tone, as with a child. "I mean no harm to you and your people."

"I—will—not—tell!" piped back Koro, though his little eyes glittered at the prizes beside him. "It is against the First Law!"

"I admire the little fellow!"

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breathed Helena with a smile.

"Can you blame him for not leading what to him are monsters to his people?" agreed Scott.

"But I *must* find out more about this, study them." Bolton turned back to the tiny captive. "Koro, would you like to have anything you want? Would you like to have a high place in our world? Honor, prestige, fame—if you understand these things? I can make you an important figure in our world, you and all your people—"

Koro listened, vaguely stirred, and felt vastly pleased at this eager interest in him.

But all the while he had been tensing himself. They were not so watchful now, as at first. Suddenly he acted. With the quickness of a mouse he ran to the edge of the table and leaped down. Their clumsy hands clutched at the spot he had been in seconds too late.

The leap to the floor, though six times his height, meant nothing to his light, springy muscles. He landed catlike, ran to the binoculars still lying there and heaved them to his shoulders in one swift motion. He scuttled across the floor, and this time he made certain the cord trailed safely behind his twinkling feet.

To Scott and Dr. Bolton the whole thing was almost a blur of motion. It was like runn ing after a rabbit, when they gave chase. Scott followed, through the hall, into the kitchen, and to the basement door, open six inches. He heard the little man bounding down the steps, in the dark. There was no electric switch in the basement. By the time Scott had dashed for the flashlight by the sink, and gone down, there was no sound at all from the little escaped prisoner.

Ten minutes later, after searching, he found the old rat hole that burrowed through dirt and wood to open air. It was no use to look outside.

"Well, he got away," shrugged Scott. "With my hundred dollar binoculars too, the little thief! Imagine a man running at full speed, carrying a refrigerator! They must be incredibly strong for their size. But so are insects."

"I'm sort of—of glad he got away," Helena murmured.

Dr. Bolton blew up. "The greatest scientific discovery of the century in my hands—and it's gone! Scott, I think you deliberately got in my way, and made only a half-hearted chase. I've seen you move twice as fast on a football field."

Scott smiled but said nothing.

Chapter 5
Koro's Revenge

Koro strode into the glade, with his mighty prize on his back.

Some of the young people danced there, in the light of the

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crescent moon. In the day-time, the Little Folk slept. But every night, between shifts of their light labors, there was dancing and music and laughter, for the Little Folk enjoyed life.

Koro was weary and somewhat thin. For a week he had struggled back, over hill and valley, resting often with his huge burden. But now his spirit sang. Elva was there, dancing, and there was no Atho present to spoil the moment. Atho was down in the village, with the women, laboring out the terms of his sentence.

"Eyoo!" called Koro. "It is I, Koro. And look what I have brought!"

The merrymakers turned and watched in wonder. Koro strode directly before Elva and lowered his prize. Its two tubes glinted with glass at both ends, and its shiny metallic surface sparkled brightly.

"How huge it is! That is a wonderful prize! What is it, Koro?" the crowd demanded.

"The Big People call it 'binoculars," stated Koro proudly. "When you look through one end of either tube, everything becomes tiny. When you look through the other end, everything grows large and near!"

There was a scramble to test this amazing statement. Awed gasps arose as some managed to peer through, at both ends, seeing each other's faces reduced or enlarged by the lenses.

"I brought it for you, Elva," Koro announced boldly. "No other has brought back a greater prize for the girl he—admires. Not even Atho, with his paltry gold watch!"

Elva started, at the name Atho, but she didn't say anything.

"You are speechless, Elva, at the magnificence of the prize!" Koro crowed. "I will dance with you tonight, Elva. And—talk with you!"

Elva answered finally. "You must be very tired, Koro. Perhaps you had better rest—"

"Tired?" Koro scoffed. He swung the prize to his shoulder again. "Come, we will show this to Atho himself!"

The procession, with Koro at the head, marched through their thicket paths to the main center of their community, beyond the dancing glade.

"Eyooo!" the cry went up. "Koro has come back with a mighty prize!"

Then, in chorus—

"The Big Ones are clumsy and witless,
We are so clever and spry,
They never will, never will, catch us,
Not to the day we die!"

Koro stopped before the hollowed stump which held part of their stores of food, slowly being readied for the coming winter.

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The strong bark door, seemingly a part of the original surface, swung outward in his hands, to reveal Atho cutting insect flesh with a group of women.

"Eyoo, Atho!" called Koro. "Leave the *other* women for a moment and come out. Look at my prize, beside which your gold watch is nothing!"

Atho came out. He gasped a little.

"You took *that* from the Big People?" He went on honestly. "Yes, it is a greater prize than mine."

Koro stared around proudly. It was good to be the hero of the hour, in all their admiring eyes. He caught Elva's eye.

"Elva, come here," he said confidentially. "Before all I will avow my intentions toward you—"

Elva moved, but she stepped beside Atho.

"And I," she spoke clearly, "avow my intentions—that I am betrothed to Atho, if he will have me. And I will marry him when his year's penance is over!"

A wondering, joyful light came over Atho's face. Since the start of his woman-status he had not had the right or opportunity to speak words of love to her. And his humiliation had been great. For many days he had wondered if Elva would learn to despise him. Now his doubts and inner tortures were dissolved.

The crowd about tinkled out in happy cheering. For over a year the little community had wondered which Elva, the fairest of the girls, would choose of Atho and Koro, the two most spirited of the young men.

Koro's face darkened, as the acclaim of the audience showed their wholehearted favor of the choice. Hatred poured from his eyes toward his triumphant rival. As Atho and Elva kissed before all, sealing their bethrothal, daggers pierced Koro's heart.

A sudden hush came over the assemblage.

One of the Elders had come down the path. What is all this hubbub about among you young ones?" demanded old Zutho. "A betrothal? Is that cause for disturbing—"

He stopped, as his eyes fell on the binoculars, and then transferred to Koro.

"You have dared to take such an enormous thing from the Big People, Koro, perhaps at considerable risk?" he snapped angrily. "This prize-seeking will yet lead to trouble. There must be a stop to it. Next some young fool will attempt a prize beyond his powers, and the First Law will be violated. Koro, did the Big People hear or see you at all?

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Koro started. All the way back from his venture, he had told himself over and over that he must never tell what had transpired. He avoided Zutho's eyes.

Wise old Zutho caught something in his face. "Koro!" You are hiding something! Answer me truthfully!"

"Nothing, Father. Nothing happened!" But Koro's voice was quivering. The fright of that moment when he was caught by the Big People came back vividly.

"Koro!" persisted the Elder. "Something frightened you terribly, back among the Big Ones. Tell me what happened. You must! Perhaps the whole safety of our people lies at stake . Koro speak!"

Weakened by his arduous journey, and his nerves already upset by Elva's choosing of Atho, Koro broke down. He told the whole story, with the hysteria of a cornered rat.

When he had finished, Zutho's face first showed relief. "Luckily you escaped, before harm was done." Then his face became stern grim. "But the prize seeking must stop. In behalf of the Elders, I hereby forbid it, from this moment on. And Koro, you must be punished. . . ."

Eyes slowly widened, as they saw what rested in Zutho's relentless face.

"I sentence you to woman-status for your entire life!"

Koro's shoulders sagged as though a mountain had fallen on them. For the first time, the crowd about realized what a potential menace the Big Ones must be, if the Elders imposed such drastic sentence on what was still not an actual violation of the First Law. For Koro had not had traffic with them willingly and had only been caught through over-eager effort in prize-seeking.

Koro turned away brokenly. Even Atho and Elva pitied him.

But that same night, Koro was mysteriously gone from the community of Little Folk . . . .

Paul Scott awoke when something tugged at his ear. Then a little piping voice shrilled in it.

"It is I, Koro, of the Little Folk! I wish to talk with you Big People!"

A few minutes later, joined by Helena and her father in the lighted living room, Scott set the little man on the mantle, where they could hear him better.

Koro eyed them, and for a moment thought of running away, panic-stricken, while there was yet time. But where? Back to the community, to serve out a lifetime sentence? And to realize that Elva could never be his? Those devil-thoughts had driven Koro to flee. Driven him to seek

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out the Big Ones. Hatred and bitterness against his people ate within his little soul.

Koro spoke with gestures.

"I wish to live with you Big People. I do not want to go back to my folk. They have sentenced me to a lifetime of degradation and humiliation. And anyway, I am sick of living like a worm, in secret, as our people always have. I wish to live in your world. You Big Ones have promised not to harm me."

"Of course we won't harm you," assured Dr. Bolton. He went on eagerly. "And will you show us where you little folk live?"

"Yes—on one condition. There is a girl called Elva—"

Scott interrupted, grasping the scientist's arm. "I don't think we should have anything to do with it," he asserted. "This little beggar is a renegade, betraying his people!"

"Yes, Dad," Helena chimed in, frowning at the little man. "We have no right to—"

"No," he muttered.

"But I'm not going to harm them," insisted Dr. Bolton. "All I want to do is observe them in their natural habitat. With Koro's help, we can do it. His eyes narrowed shrewdly. "You call them fairies. Perhaps they have moonlight dances, according to legend. Think of the chance of seeing that!"

Scott had already thought of it. A chance to see the Dance of the Fairies! It appealed to him, with all the appeal of things mysterious and unknown . . . .

Full moon night, Koro had told them, would be best.

They stared out over the glade, waiting for the first of the Little Folk to appear. They were fifty feet from the glade itself, and concealed behind thick bushes. Koro had warned them that they must make no slightest sound, for his people had sensitive ears.

Scott waited breathlessly. It had been a week since little Koro had come to them. In that week, Dr. Bolton had spent long hours conversing with the mannikin, taking notes. They had seemed to become almost intimate. Scott didn't like it. They had too much of the air of two plotters who, though one was a giant and one a midge, were kindred souls.

"Hsst!"

It was a warning from Koro, perched on Dr. Bolton's shoulder.

Out in the glade, the Little Folk trooped into view. Their chirping laughter and bird-like voices tinkled through the clear air. Thin flutings and the piping of tiny horns sounded weirdly, like fara-

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way echoes. And the Little Folk danced, their tiny, sinuous bodies flashing in the spotted moonlight that slanted down through tall trees. They formed a ring at times, tripping daintily around and around in that enchanted circle. The music was wild, the dancing unrehearsed, but it was more supremely artistic than anything ever achieved in the outer world.

Scott realized that. Realized that he was witnessing something few mortal eyes had ever beheld. It was a glimpse into fairyland, so exquisitely perfect in setting and execution that it stung the eyes. It was something ancient and sacred, and divinely wonderful. He could feel Helena's hand trembling in his and knew that she, too, felt the witchery of the scene.

Scott turned his head.

Little Koro was whispering in Dr. Bolton's ear, pointing into the glade. And suddenly the scientist jerked his hand. Scott was startled to see the glint of a long string, leading to the space over the glade. At the same time something that hung at a height of ten feet dropped into the forepart of the glade, It had been in shadow. Scott hadn't noticed it, nor apparently, had the Little Folk—until too late.

Scott saw a hoop of wire descend, and billowing out from it, like a parachute, was mosquito netting! The hoop dropped, encircling a group of the little dancers.

It was a trap!

Like the vanishment of a beautiful dream, the glade scene had broken up. The Little Folk melted away, like swift shadows. But those caught within the hoop were still there, struggling to escape the folds of the netting. They had been snared like little animals.

Scott grabbed Dr. Bolton's arm as he leaped up.

"What have you done?" he demanded angrily. "How could you shatter such a wonderful thing? When did you set up the trap?"

"This afternoon," returned the scientist. "While you and Helena were wandering somewhere. And while the Little Folk slept, as Koro informed me. Forgot to tell you. Now let me go, before they get away."

Dr. Bolton wrenched himself away and ran to the glade, Scott and Helena following.

Some of the Little Folk had scurried back and were already heaving up one side of the heavy wire loop, to rescue those within the netting. Some of the girls had been dragged free. But at sight of the Big People's lumbering forms approaching, they darted away with thin pipings of fear.

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Dr. Bolton stooped, upended the loop, and closed the mouth of the netting-sack. His eyes gleamed as though he had bagged prize game. He held it up before his eyes, counting the squirming forms within. Their moanings of fright were muffled by the cloth.

"Eight men and one of their girls," he said. "They managed to rescue the other girls, the little scamps. Well, these will do for the present."

Koro had been peering down closely from his perch on the scientist's shoulder. "And the girl is Elva! It is as I wished!"

Scott cursed. He felt like taking the little traitor in his fingers and squeezing until he shrieked. Evidently Koro had plotted this in detail with Dr. Bolton, to drop the net at the right time, and catch her.

"Poor things—" Helena murmured, but her father did not hear.

As the party tramped back to their car, parked five miles away—which was the nearest they had been able to come in this wildwood—Scott spoke bitterly.

"I still don't think it's right, Dr. Bolton!"

"Right!" snapped the scientist scoffingly. "I haven't broken any law, have I?"

"You've broken a moral law," retorted Scott. "As much as if you had raided a pygmy village in Africa and kidnaped some of them."

"Scott, be reasonable," the scientist said impatiently. "This is in the interests of science. You call them fairies, in romantic nonsense, but this is far more significant—scientifically. Go back to the so-called "missing link," maybe a million years ago. Evolution fashioned from the progenitor all the primates—apes, monkeys, gorillas, baboons, and the various species of sub-man, like Pithecanthropus, Heidelberg, Neanderthal, and finally homo sapiens—*and* of course this pygmy offshoot!

"Or else it was a white pygmy branch whose chromosomes carried smallness as a dominant, rather than recessive, character. True man rose rapidly and killed off his intelligent rivals, back in pre-history. But this little pygmy offshoot race, perhaps because of its smallness, survived. This will make scientific history, when I announce my results, after a study of the Little Folk! And you prate of moral rights!"

Scott subsided. What could he say, against that cold, scientific attitude?

"As for Koro, my little friend," added Dr. Bolton, "I did him a return favor. Caught his little Elva for him. Seems to be his light o' love!"

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Chapter 6
Atho Goes Forth

Atho was mechanically peeling an insect shell from its juicy meat, when the clear blast of a horn sounded. It was a loud, brazen sound that rang through the community like a wailing siren.

The alarm! Seldom used, it denoted great emergency, as when a monstrous bear happened to stumble into their community, sniffing around hopefully.

Dropping his flint implement, Atho sprang to the bark door and flung it wide, leaping out. Pandemonium reigned. The Little Folk were milling about, jabbering excitedly. Soon those who had been in the glade came flying up, yelling.

"The Big People! They have come! A trap fell! Nine of our people were captured and taken away! And Koro was with the Big People!"

Never in the memory of those now living had such a great calamity happened. Stark fear and anguish arose in all their tiny hearts. A wail quivered in the night air, from their combined throats.

Old Zutho and the other Elders hobbled forth, hearing the grave tidings.

"Hark!" Zutho yelled out. "Quiet yourselves and listen to me. We must not cast our wits on the ground!"

The assemblage fell silent, turning their heads to Zutho.

"My people," he said in his cracked tones, "this is our lot in life—to ever scurry from the feet and brutality of the Big Ones. It has happened before, in our long history—many, many times. Do not think this generation is the first to be so cursed. But this generation is the first to be cursed, in a long time, with the presence of a traitor—Koro! If he ever returns, I pronounce sentence of death upon him, for traffic with the Big People, as the First Law states!"

He shook his head bleakly.

"But he may not return. Fool that I was, I should not have been so unthinking, when he fled. I did not think he would go to the Big Ones, and betray us. No, I did not think that. It is hard to believe that any of us would be a traitor . . . ."

His voice trailed away brokenly, and all the Little Folk felt the weight of that lost trust in one of them.

Zutho waved his emotions aside.

"There is only one thing to do now. We must move, before the Big Ones return for more of us. We must leave this place, that has been our happy home for two centuries, and seek another secret spot. We will find another

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grotto, for our homes, and another glade for our dancing, and we will continue life there. . . ."

His voice stopped, and all knew why it ended. For this was but a repetition of what had happened countless times before. In their new home they would dwell happily—till the next time . . . .

The Big Ones ruled Earth.

Old Zutho's voice suddenly became almost a snarl. "And I forever banish from our memory the name of Koro, who betrayed us! Cursed be he, till the end of time!"

"Cursed be he, till the end of time!" chanted the crowd, giving vent to their anger.

Zutho composed his features. "Who were the victims?"

One of those who had been a witness in the glade, barely escaping the hoop himself, answered, giving the names of the captured men. "And one of the girls, he finished, "Beauteous Elva."

"Elva!" It was a whisper from Atho. All eyes fell on him pityingly.

"Elva!" This time it was a half-shriek. "My Elva—"

He stopped, choking, and there was not an eye there that did not have a tear in it.

Zutho patted the young man's shoulder. "I am sorry it had to be she, my son. But we must accept fate. There can be no reprisal, or rescue, or revenge. We cannot war on the Big People for these things. We can only scurry away from their mighty feet—"

Atho shook off the hand. His nostrils flared as he flung his head high.

'I go," he said in a cold, deadly voice. "I go to the Big People—"

"I forbid it, Atho!" said Zutho sternly. "It is senseless. We can only flee, I tell you—"

"I am going!"

Some of the other young men tensed forward half eagerly, as though to join him, but old Zutho shook his head, waving them back. He put his arm on Atho's shoulder.

"I understand, son. Go! But promise me one thing—that you will not attempt to kill a Big One. If that happened, they would hunt us like wolves and stamp us into the earth!"

"I promise, Father. But Koro. . . ." He did not finish the threat. And with that, Atho went to the young men's quarters, picked up his weapons, and stalked from the village.

He left behind him a scene of hasty packing of food, essential paraphernalia, and organization of the march toward a new home. It was tragic, this uprooting of an olden home. It was the exodus

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of a wandering people who never knew a true safety.

Atho made his way through the the wild woodland at a steady, untiring lope. His strong, lithe muscles could keep up the pace for days. It would take him three days without sleep to reach the lone house of the Big People beyond Bald Mountain, where Elva lay in captivity.

His limbs were encased in leggings, he wore shoes, and his head was bare. Only his spider-silk shirt and moleskin trunks covered his torso. His weapons were three. Behind his back was slung a quiver of toothpick-sized bone arrows, and an ashwood bow beside it. In his belt hung his flint-headed axe. In his hand he balanced a long lance, whose end was one of the Big People's steel needles, an ideal point to the wooden shaft.

In the first hour, to test his eye, Atho unslung his bow and fitted it with an arrow, when he heard the drone of a wasp. The insect appeared, as big as his head, darting over a patch of berries, looking for some unlucky caterpillar.

It was a small, swift target. Atho pivoted, bow taut, sighted for the wasp-thin thread that joined the stingered thorax to the body. He let fly and the sliver of bone neatly sliced through the body-thread, sailing on to embed itself in a tree branch beyond. The severed halves of the wasp tumbled to the ground.

Atho grunted in satisfaction. Good enough. He had full control of his nerves, and needed it. He went on. His eyes, as he swung along, darted constantly on all sides and above. Many dangers lurked for the unwary.

And suddenly one of them materialized. There was a warning hiss, to his sensitive little ears, and a long sinuous form shot out of a thicket he was passing. It was a snake, python-sized to Atho with its length of three feet. The blunt head and sharp fangs aimed straight for Atho's head.

A snake is one of the quickest of beasts. Even the swift little shrew is no match in speed of striking. But the snake's thrust missed Atho, by the scant margin of a thistle thread. For Atho moved the quicker.

Atho's body twisted aside like a steel spring. The snake struck again, and again Atho swerved. At the same time he leaped backward, bringing up his lance, balancing it lightly in casting position. Then he changed his mind. The snake, with its keen, lidless eyes, would dodge the cast.

Atho instead clutched the spear's shaft with both hands, over his head. When next the snake's great head and cavernous red mouth lunged at him, Atho

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stood his ground. He thrust his spear forward like a lightning bolt. The fine needle-point, ground by flint to incredible sharpness, passed between the fangs into the roof of the mouth. Up and up it pierced, under the drive of Atho's full strength. It jarred against the upper bone of the snake's skull.

Atho let go the shaft and scrambled back. He watched as the snake, with its brain pierced through and through, threshed wildly over the ground. Not till many minutes later did final paralysis come. Atho approached then and jerked his spear out, wiping off the pale blood on a leaf. At any other time, he would have stayed to strip the skin, useful for clothing and winter shelter, and haul it back to his people.

But he loped away, at a run, the snake already forgotten. His destination and present purpose were far grimmer than mere battles with forest killers.

On the second day, his constant exertion demanded food. He had not wished to carry any, as a burden would slow him. He must hunt. Slowing to a walk, he began creeping from grass-patch to tree-bole, silently as the wind, seeking prey. He came upon a grasshopper drowsing in the daytime heat. It was half as long as Atho. He crept close, within spear thrust, and jabbed it down into the thick thorax, pinning the creature to the ground.

The grasshopper spun about on this axis of impalement. Atho was careless, watching. Something suddenly struck him violently in the chest, and Atho tumbled head over heels backward. He righted himself dazedly, gasping for breath. He grinned at himself. The grasshopper's hind leg had a kick to be respected.

When he staggered back, the grasshopper was weakening. Atho chopped off its head with his axe. The legs still struck out feebly, as though unaware it should now die.

Not wishing another encounter with those powerful legs, Atho waited. Suddenly his ears pricked. He heard leaves rustling, perhaps a dozen feet away. Then he saw it—a field mouse, nibbling and rooting among ground berries. Atho licked his lips. Red meat, instead of the blubbery, unsatisfying insect tissue.

But the mouse was not an easy creature to stalk. One step toward it, and it would likely hear him and scamper away, at a scuttering pace that even Atho could not match. Slowly, quietly, the tiny hunter reached a hand behind his back and again unslung his bow. Fitting an arrow to the spider-silk string, he took careful aim, let fly.

The arrow sped straight and

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true. It impaled the side haunch of the mouse and buried itself completely, slicing the heart in half. The mouse ran twenty feet and then lay still, bleeding to death.

Atho dined well of raw tender flesh and arose with renewed strength surging in his veins. He resumed his steady lope.

Would he never reach his destination? The way seemed stretched by some diabolical means, because of his anxiety for Elva. Atho knew he hadn't lost the way. Not he, to whom every bit of moss, every slant of the sun's rays, every twist of the ground, was a signpost of direction.

But he must hurry, hurry. . . .

And then, as though fate wished to hinder him, another killer stalked him. This time a truly formidable foe. Not the great bear, for he was big and clumsy like the Big People and could be avoided as easily as a lumbering mountain. Not the deer, whose hard hoofs could be side-stepped and who took no note of flesh as food. Nor yet the weasel or badger or wolverine, for they were all kill and no brain.

It was the cunning fox, the one creature who combined a canny brain with swiftness and power.

Atho spied it first, as a glint of red fur far ahead, and stopped as though he had struck an invisible barrier. His little heart hammered, and he stepped back, hoping to sneak away. But unfortunately he was upwind from the fox. Its keen nose told it of the mannikin within range, and the red fur began to slink toward him.

No use to run. The fox was a demon of speed. No chance to climb a tree in such short time. There was nothing to do but back himself against a stump and await the great, fearsome assassin.

There were the arrows, of course. Atho unloosed three, but knew he would never strike those little, gleaming eyes which were not the target of the owl's great saucer-eyes. And thick fur could never be pierced by his tiny shafts.

Now the fox was close, jaws slavering. Atho unhitched his flint-headed axe, and held it in one hand. His ready spear was in the other. This was to be a battle beside which the struggle with the ferret in the glade had been a child's game.

The fox was three times as long as Atho's body, and perhaps ten times as heavy. Its jaws in one mighty snap could crunch Atho in half. The fox had all the advantage—speed, power, weight and size.

But Atho had courage all out of proportion to his size.

The fox loped up almost carelessly, sure of its victory. Its

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lips drew back, revealing sharp ferral teeth. It sat for a moment three feet from its victim, as though grinning at this foolish little tidbit who did not even run, as every sane rabbit at least tried.

Then it lunged forward, jaws wide for the kill.

Atho timed his stroke and brought down his flint-axe on the sharp, pointed nose. The fox leaped back with a bark of pain. The blow had been light and glancing, but it drew blood. With a snarl, the killer circled and came at Atho from the side, to drive him into the open.

But Atho knew that was fatal. Cunning must be met with superior cunning. Still with his back to the stump, slowing Reynard's attack by its presence, Atho swung again at the nose, heavily. This time he clipped off a piece and the fox howled in pain.

Then from its throat issued a growl of rage. Gnashing its teeth, it closed in thrice more. And thrice more Atho's arm beat down, gouging into the fox's tender snout. The killer's dark, beady eyes clouded with beserk fury, and Atho knew he had evened the odds, for rage is the poison of reason.

Had the fox quietly and in its cunning worried Atho out of position, the battle would have ended in time with Atho's death. But now the killer lunged without thought, clumsy in its sheer rage.

The death-stroke—now was the time. . . .

Atho leaped, as he had leaped before the ferret. Twice his height he leaped and landed on the fox's neck. Digging his toes behind the jowls for a foot-hold, he raised his lance and plunged it down, through the fox's throat. All this in a blur of swiftness.

With a gurgling bark, the fox hunched. Atho's feet slipped and he flew through the air, to land with a thump on the ground, his breath knocked out for the second time that day. When he arose, gasping and staggering, the fox was threshing wildly, clawing at the lance that pierced its throat and drained its life blood.

A half hour later, Atho kicked the carcass.

"Eyoo!" he cried, withdrawing his spear and waving it over his head. "Eyoooo! I have killed a fox!"

Then he sobered from his wild elation at the great deed—there was no false modesty in Atho—and resumed his grim journey.

Nothing else worthy of concern crossed his path. The night of the third day he reached the lone house of the Big People.

Chapter 7
Among the Big Ones

All was quiet in the house as Atho crept through the rat hole

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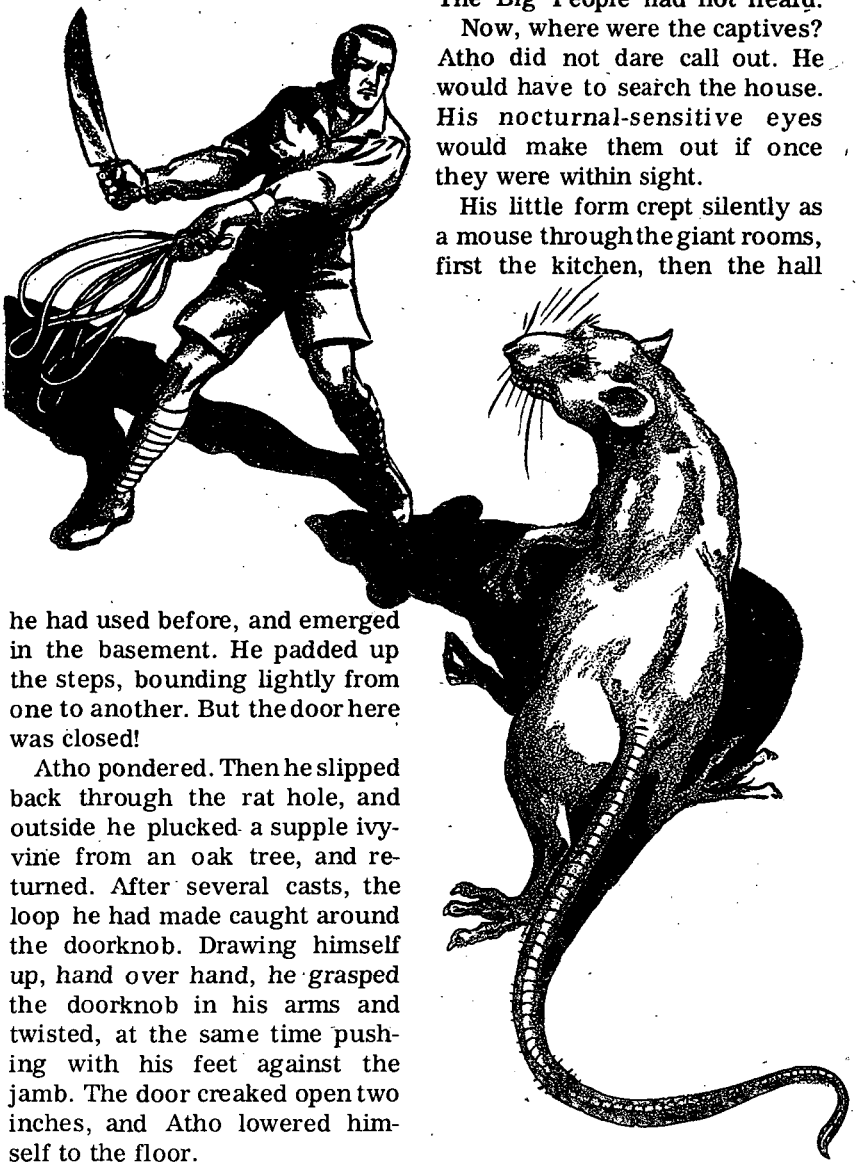

The Big People had not heard.

Now, where were the captives? Atho did not dare call out. He would have to search the house. His nocturnal-sensitive eyes would make them out if once they were within sight.

His little form crept silently as a mouse through the giant rooms, first the kitchen, then the hall he had used before, and emerged in the basement. He padded up the steps, bounding lightly from one to another. But the door here was closed!

Atho pondered. Then he slipped back through the rat hole, and outside he plucked a supple ivy-vine from an oak tree, and returned. After several casts, the loop he had made caught around the doorknob. Drawing himself up, hand over hand, he grasped the doorknob in his arms and twisted, at the same time pushing with his feet against the jamb. The door creaked open two inches, and Atho lowered himself to the floor.

He stood silently for a moment.

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and living room. He found no sign of his quarry.

Then, in another room he found the first of the Big People, breathing loudly and regularly in sleep, in his bed. Atho looked at the face of the young man, from the rear bedpost, and almost thought of waking him. He looked kindly, somehow. But no. He was one of the terrible Big People, who had captured Elva and the others for some purpose known only to the Big People's heartless minds.

He crept out and into another bedroom. Here lay a woman figure. Her face was sweet, but troubled-looking. Somehow, she reminded him of his Elva. These two, the man and girl, had been the ones he had heard whispering love-words to each other, on Bald Mountain that time. Was it possible — just possible — that they would know, therefore, what his love for Elva meant? How his heart was torn and pained by their separation? Would they help him, if they knew?

Atho pondered that for a long moment. If only he knew! But no, he could not take a chance. The Big People were an unknown quantity. They were cruel monsters, all of them, caring little about the tiny folk who happened to live in their world.

As he pattered out of this room, he saw a gleam of light from an upstairs room. At the top of the steps, he peered cautiously around a partly ajar door, into a brightly lighted room. He almost gasped aloud.

There before a table sat the third of the Big People, the man of the gold watch. His face was the face Atho had disliked from first glimpse. There were hard, cold lines. No emotion or sympathy or kindness lay there. He was turning the pages of what Atho vaguely knew to be a book.

Then Atho started violently.

Koro was there, too, standing on the table before a glinting surface that reflected his image, as still waters did. He was turning and admiring himself and his clothes. He was dressed in a miniature copy of the Big People's clothing, evidently made for him. They were stiff, awkward garments, and ridiculous on Koro, but he seemed pleased.

At sight of Koro, Atho's lips had writhed. And the rage that pounded in his little breast was a killing rage. Almost, he leaped out, to fulfill the urge. But that would be folly, at this moment.

The Big One's voice rumbled out. "Yes, Koro, I will civilize you and your people. You have been living like little savages. You look perfectly human in our clothing."

"I will be famous in your world, will I not?" Koro piped back. "And I will be the governor of

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—of all of our people there?"

The Big One nodded absently, going back to his book.

"Here is the clue," he said, as if thinking aloud. "Eohippus, the tiny horse, survived in a world of mighty killers, because of its smallness. You Little Folk survived for the same reason. Our common ancestor evolved the man-branch. I will show that anology in my papers—" His voice trailed away in deep thought. Koro shrugged, understanding little of that.

Atho crept away.

Koro, breaking the sacred First Law into a thousand pieces, plotting with the Big One the enslavement of his people, deserved death. But first, Atho must find Elva and the others, and rescue them if possible. They were not in the lighted room, as his swift eyes had taken account.

He pattered to the only room left, also a bedroom, but untenanted and dark. He noticed, finally, the high shelf against one wall, hung over a large item of furniture—a writing desk. On the shelf lay a queer object, a sort of cage of wire-netting. It was the same material the Big People used before their windows as screens to keep out insects, which they didn't care for as food.

Atho stiffened, as he stared, his eyes returning to full night-vision after the glare of the other room. He saw movement, beyond the wire-netting. A tiny form was pacing there, and Atho saw that it was one of the captives from the glade. Not Elva, but one of the men. Were they all there?

Atho had to find out, though it would be tricky business with Koro and the Big One awake and near. Atho crept back to the basement door and retrieved his vine-lasso. Returning to the bedroom, he pondered the task before him, and then laid down his spear and bow, which would be in his way. With only the lasso and his flint-axe dangling in his belt, he clambered up one leg of the chair before the desk. From the chair he reached the top of the desk.

His eyes glanced around in instinctive appraisal, as always in the pursuance of something untried. Queer things lay on the desk—a pair of gloves, an inkstand, several pins and a writing pen with a steel dagger at the end. Atho did not know their names or uses. Nor did they concern him.

The shelf was still high out of reach. He cast with his lariat for an iron projection that jutted out from the shelf beside the cage. The vine, though supple, was not easy to handle. The cast was four times over his head—twenty-five feet by a comparable scale of measurement.

Each time the vine fell back, it made a slithering sound, loud to

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Atho's ears. If only they wouldn't hear, in the other room! Those in the cage did, however, They crowded to the netting, looking down wonderingly. Atho made a gesture to keep silent, and they nodded.

But he almost cried aloud himself when he saw Elva's face there. He waved and slung his vine-rope, with renewed determination.

Finally it caught, and quickly Atho hauled himself to the shelf. The captives pressed against the wire-netting.

"Atho!" one of them breathed.

"Quiet!" hissed back Atho. "On your life. I will try to open this cage."

Elva pressed before him, her lovely face haggard and strained. Atho silently cursed the wire-netting that prevented his touching her. But their eyes spoke their love.

"Are you all right, darling?" he whispered anxiously. He noticed now the strange costume she wore, like that of a Big One of the feminine sex.

"Yes, but it has been horrible," Elva half-sobbed back. "We have been forced to wear their kind of clothing, made by the woman of the Big Ones. We were told we must never expect to go back to our woodland home, and must learn to be like the Big People. Oh, Atho, our whole life will be ruined!"

"And Koro brought this all on us!" Atho ground out angrily.

Then he sprang away. Time was flying. He went to the cage-door but found it beyond his powers to open. Some strange metal device locked it securely. After examining all sides of the cage, he drew a breath and unslung his flint-axe. He would grind through the wire-netting.

He began to rub the razor-sharp edge across several strands of the hard wire. It made a scraping sound, so loud that Atho stopped with a beating pulse. Surely the Big One in the lighted room must hear. Or if not he, then Koro with his keen ears. But no interruption came and Atho sawed away steadily, with the anxious hopeful eyes of the captives on every motion. One of the wire strands parted suddenly. Atho's spirits surged. A dozen more and a way would be open.

At last it was done. Atho dropped his flint-axe and thrust the split wires apart. The two-inch wide aperture was just enough for the little captives to writhe through. Atho extended his hand, and Elva came first. Then the others, till they all stood on the shelf. Atho slid down the rope to the desk top and caught Elva as she followed. The others began to follow.

Suddenly there was a shout behind Atho. He whirled.

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Koro stood there, having just clambered to the desk-top from the chair. Shocked surprise was in his face.

"Atho!" he gasped. "I thought I heard noises—"

And with that Koro raised his voice in a shrill scream, before Atho could reach him. "Dr. Bolton! Help! The captives are escaping! Dr. Bol—"

Atho flung himself forward. He drove against Koro's legs as he tried to run and flung him heavily to the desk-top. Koro squirmed erect and backed away from the blaze in Atho's eyes.

"You are going to die, Koro!" Atho said in a low, deadly tone. "I am going to kill you with my bare hands!"

The man who had just descended the rope charged forward grimly, but Atho waved him aside.

"Back! Back!" he commanded. "This is my privilege!"

Atho jumped forward, battering at Koro's face with his hard fists. In desperation, Koro fought back. He had no further chance to turn, or breath to cry out. Blood streamed from his nose as Atho's blows took effect. Twice more Atho grasped him by the middle, raised him, and flung him on the desk-top, so that its implements rattled. Then he flung himself on the stunned Koro, to grasp his throat and choke the treacherous life from him.

"Atho!" Elva's voice rang warningly. "The Big One comes—"

Atho paused. He had forgotten that danger, in his blinding rage. Koro had the chance to suddenly leap up and back. He snatched up something, and when he turned, Atho was faced by a sharp murderous weapon—

Atho barely checked his renewed attack in time to keep from impaling himself. He had no weapons himself; the spear and bow were below on the floor, the flint-axe above on the shelf. And Atho had to scramble back as Koro, face alight with triumph, charged at him, handling his weapon as a sword. One thrust, and the sharp point would kill Atho. The pseudo-sword flicked several times, as Atho dodged desperately, and once its point tore a gash in his arm.

Atho faced quick death.

And then something was thrust in his hand. It was a large, heavy implement, its end equipped with a steel part, which Elva had dragged from its place near a glass bowl filled with dark fluid.

With the quickness of thought, Atho raised it in his two hands, as a lance, and drove it forward.

Koro had just lunged forward, thrusting with his sword, intent on delivering the death-stroke....

There was the pound of heavy feet at the door and then brilliant electric light flooded the room.

Dr. Bolton rushed forward, hav-

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ing heard Koro's cry of alarm. He reached the desk, stopped, staring at the strange tableau on his desk top. Two little men came at one another. One held a pin as a weapon, and lunged forward with it. But the other twisted aside agilely, gripping the desk's writing-pen in his hand. With a furious thrust, he impaled his adversary.

And the victim—it was Koro—fell dead.

Dr. Bolton stood rooted in surprise. It had happened too quickly for him to intervene. He was aware that Scott and Helena had just entered, still in their nightclothes, staring in horrified fascination at the little drama.

Then a slow smile came over Dr. Bolton's face.

"The little devils!" he murmured. "It's just like a play, performed for our benefit, by puppets on a stage! Think of the sensation they will be to the world. They're natural born little actors, by Heaven—"

"Good God!" exploded Scott. "Don't you realize, Dr. Bolton, what a tragedy this represents to the Little Folk? The traitor, Koro, meeting his just reward for betrayal. It's not a play. To them it's the meaning of their whole life—"

On the desk-top, Atho looked down at the dead body of Koro, wild exultance in his veins. It was the first time within memory that one of the Little Folk had killed another, but never had cause been more just.

Elva's soft hand was pulling at his arm.

"We must flee, Atho!" she cried. "The Big People will catch us again!"

Atho awoke to the exigency of the moment. His eyes darted about, but he saw no escape. The doors of the big room were closed, the windows down. They might leap to the floor and lead the Big Ones a merry chase, but eventually they would be caught.

"There is no escape," Atho announced to his party, almost calmly.

"But what will we do?" Elva moaned. "I cannot stand further imprisonment—"

Atho put his arms around her protectingly and patted her shoulder. All the while, he had been hearing what the Big Ones spoke.

"Listen!" he told her. "Listen to the Big People. I think perhaps there is a drama unfolding among them, as vital as ours—"

Dr. Bolton had waved a weary hand, at Scott's last words.

"Nonsense! Must we argue about this forever? Look at it rationally. We'll civilize the Little Folk. We'll find a place for them in our civilization. As little actors and acrobats, they'll delight audiences. Or, if you will, think of more serious tasks for them. As

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surgeons' helpers, with their quick little hands, performing delicate operations beyond our skill. Or as makers of fine watches, tools, instruments—oh, I see limitless possibilities, if they're trained right."

"Trained?" Scott groaned. "Like little slaves!"

Shrugging, Dr. Bolton moved closer to the desk-top, where the Little Folk had gathered in a knot. They shrank back.

"Back in your cage," he said. "The new one too. He'll replace Koro. Don't try to escape. You can't get out of this room. I will lift you one by one—"

Dr. Bolton extended his hand toward the pair that stood arm in arm. The little man struck at his fingers with the pin he had picked up, pricking him.

"We will not be your slaves!" Atho piped defiantly. And beside him, Elva sent a pleading glance at Scott and Helena.

Dr. Bolton gasped, then scowled blackly. "Little man, I'll—"

His hand reached again, as though to grasp Atho and squeeze —"

Scott clutched the scientist's arm and whirled him about.

"I've had enough of this, Dr. Bolton!" he blazed. "For three days you've played with these creatures like an all-powerful god. You forced Helena to make those little clothes that are utterly hateful to them. You've been trying to cram our civilization down their throats. You want to take them from their free, happy life in the wild and gear them like tiny cogs in our mechanical civilization. Can't you see it would destroy their souls? Can't you see the pain and fright in their little eyes as we monsters talk over their fate?"

"And can't you see how those two love one another, man and girl, just as Scott and I do?" Helena murmured, staring down tenderly at Elva in Atho's arms.

"They're entitled to their own lives, and they're going free!" Scott concluded. "I won't let them be the guinea-pigs of science, the playthings of the world. They were never meant for that."

"How romantic!" scoffed Dr. Bolton. "But from the practical, scientific viewpoint, it's silly talk." His voice became harsh. "Scott, if you stand in my way—"

But Scott was through talking.

His fist lashed out, clipping the scientist neatly on the chin. Without a sound he crumpled to the floor.

"Sorry, Helena, I had to do it," Scott said.

Shock faded from Helena's face. "You had to do it," she agreed. "He'll get over it. He has all the data he needs, to publish a paper. And Koro's body as proof. And some day he'll realize we were right. I'm sure he will. It was just his scientific zeal and

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the wrong viewpoint on the Little Folk."

They smiled down at the Little Folk, arm in arm. Atho and Elva, also arm in arm, smiled back. That one thing the race of giants and race of midgets had in common, if nothing else.

"Will your people be safe in a new place soon?" Scott asked.

Atho nodded. "They are migrating now. By tomorrow, there will be no trace of them."

Scott strode to the door and opened it. The Little Folk leaped to the floor and followed as he opened the door leading out into still, calm night. Like scampering kittens, the Little People melted into shadow, capering in their sheer delight.

And faintly, the two Big People seemed to hear the tinkle of fairy horns and the laughter of tiny voices, under the soft full moon.

The End

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THE PSIONIC MOUSETRAP

By MURRAY LEINSTER

A different sort of spy story from the Dean of Science Fiction, whose recent "Overdrive" stories in Amazing *have reaffirmed his position as one of the most durable masters in the field. This one—set against the background of the Cold War—begins 45,000 feet above frozen Siberia, but for an American scientist turned counterspy, it could end six feet below it—unless he can trigger a psionic device his captors think is an atomic bomb!*

THE first sign of a radar-beam came when they were still at forty-five thousand feet, under the parachute that had been designed to stop a jet-bomber on a short runway. Gordon was looking grimly at the stars, then, sucking at his oxygen-tube and thinking ironically of his mission and that of the man with him.

He didn't know who the other man was, of course. They'd been blindfolded in the plane that dropped them so that neither could give a description of the other if things went wrong. Gordon wondered sardonically what his companion's especial fitness was. His, of course, was that he knew Woodbury—and Woodbury's work besides. He could not be fooled. If there should happen to be any psionic developments below, he'd recognize them for what they were, and that would help him in dealing with them. Also, Woodbury was a close personal friend. They'd worked together for years—even in some of Woodbury's more elementary research in psionics. Gordon could be absolutely certain that it was Woodbury that he killed or gave the means of suicide to IF he was lucky enough to get at him.

But a radar-beam hit the men under the parachute while they were still forty-five thousand feet high. There, half the cosmos was bright stars in a background of utter darkness. The other half, below, was blackness which was this part of Siberia. The plane

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that had dumped them was no longer even a faint bluish rocket-discharge fleeing through the constellations. There was nothing anywhere but the stars and the darkness and the two men, absurdly and monstrously muffled, swinging beneath the great black chute.

The other man tugged clumsily at the arm of Gordon's altitude-suit. Gordon squirmed around and looked. The small face of a hand-size radar-alarm glowed briefly, and faded, and glowed briefly again. A revolving radar beam, somewhere below, undoubtedly reporting their existence as a bright blip on a faintly luminescent plate. It was telling the operator that an object was descending from the skies.

Gordon said nothing. At forty-five thousand feet there is no point in conversation. One needs to keep busy sucking oxygen to stay alive. If a radar-beam was on them, obviously staying alive was not going to be especially likely. Presently there'd be shells arching up from the nothingness below, and proximity fuses would make quite sure that anything descending from the frozen heights was blasted to bits. Woodbury would be very much disappointed if his captors told him afterward about men who had come to kill him, and had been killed first. He might weep bitterly in his disappointment. Gordon felt very sorry for Woodbury.

But nothing happened—yet. At forty thousand feet, the other man showed Gordon the radar-alarm dial again. A second beam had joined the first. Now two revolving radars scanned them. The flashes were unequally bright, and they had not quite the same period, but there was no longer any possibility that the two men might land unnoticed. It might be that presently a wing of jet-planes would come streaking through darkness to set off flares and examine them to make sure that this was a spy-drop and not a bombing. The dropping of an H-bomb would be an economy if it killed Woodbury. So the planes might come to see if that was the idea. This part of Siberia was almost empty. There were a few log villages and a few dirt roads, but there were no cities or military installations visible to the cameras of the robojets which came over at high altitude to do aerial mapping, and of which one in six got back. A hellbomb

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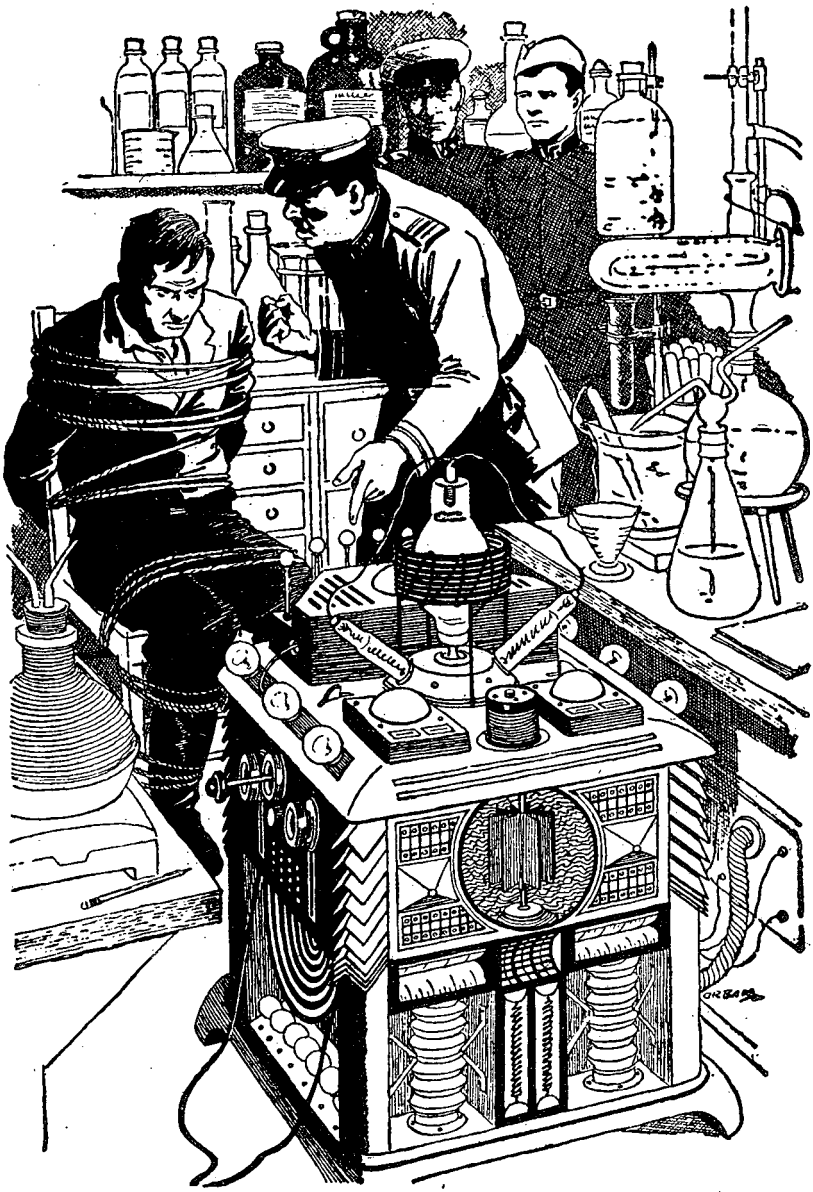

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could be dropped here without starting a war.

At thirty-five thousand feet the radar-alarm glowed with a new signal. The two series of flashes continued, but the whole dial-face now glowed continuously with a swiftly flickering half-light. This simply could not be anything but a radar gun-sight, laying anti-aircraft guns on the spot where their shells would meet the descending chute. Gordon felt himself wincing as he waited for the flashes which he might perceive when the shells burst, and before he ceased to perceive anything.

Still, no shells came. Two scanning radars and a gun-sight on them. Two men, thirty thousand feet above the earth, swinging underneath the stars. They had little more privacy than the proverbial goldfish. Radar wouldn't tell that there were two men instead of one, but it told enough.

At eighteen thousand feet, Gordon removed the oxygen-tube from his mouth, opened the gas-release so the plastic tank would empty itself, and then pressed the destruction-stud and dropped it. The other man was similarly occupied. Gordon saw the flares as the tanks consumed themselves like miniature shooting stars above the cloud-banks. Weather had predicted a heavy overcast for this area.

The other man began to wriggle out of his altitude suit. Gordon duplicated the feat. They were, then, very absurdly dressed like Siberian peasants. They even smelled like Siberian peasants—at least Gordon did—and they had carefully been supplied with individual fauna suitable to their roles. Gordon had also been treated with a skin-anaesthetic so that he would not itch intolerably. He would scratch, but only absently. He would not have to remember how much to scratch and how much to endure.

The stars vanished, overhead. The men had reached the top of the cloud-bank. They would not know how many layers of mist lay between them and undoubtedly now-alerted watchers on the ground. Gordon said:

"I don't like the way things are going. We ought to be dead." He thought grimly of what might have been developed below if the Russians had really succeeded in picking Woodbury's brain. He added coldly: "We may be just dropping into a bigger and better mousetrap."

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The simile of a better mousetrap was quite inadequate, of course. The science of psionics was bound to make as much difference in human culture—and war—as the discovery of fire or metals. Woodbury, presumably down below, knew more about it than any other man alive. He almost *was* the science of psionics. The Russians might have anything from the controlled delivery of unlimited power from substance, to teleportation and even less guessable things. It depended on what they'd gotten from Woodbury and what they'd done with it.

The other man under the parachute grunted. "Ready."

Gordon said: "Three, two, one—Geronimo!"

He pulled the release-cord. They dropped like stones. The big chute behind them whipped away. There was no metal on it—not even buckles. In the thick cloud-stuff through which the two men dropped, the left-behind parachute thrashed wildly when its burden dropped away. Then its igniters took effect. The chute and its cords and the altitude-suits destroyed themselves by fire in the thickness of the clouds. Only fine ash would descend, and that would be scattered over leagues of ground. There would be no clues dropped to earth for men on the ground to interpret.

It was a one-man parachute that checked the dizzy plunge of the two men, later. They did not know whether they were still in the cloud-banks or not. They could see absolutely nothing. They were belted together and the other man swung the radar-alarm into view again and said curtly:

"The guns are to northward. We seem to be spinning a little."

Clinging close, their bodies tightly fastened into one object, they descended much too swiftly. Gordon worked the shrouds, with his eyes on a tiny, luminous-needle compass. He checked the twisting. Then he hauled fiercely to spill air. He definitely did not feel easier because they were not shot down.

They saw headlights below. Robojet planes had photographed all this area without finding any trace of motor vehicles or gun emplacements. But the radar gunsight proved that there were antiaircraft weapons. Now headlights proved that there was motorized equipment, too. Underground, camouflaged installa-

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tions might conceal any number of men. Apparently, they did.

But danger from such things could be accepted calmly. Gordon was concerned with much more deadly things. The deadliness came in part because they couldn't be anticipated. With Woodbury carrying most of his specialized knowledge in his head, and nobody knowing what could be done with it, anybody could develop cold chills merely by making guesses.

The sky was black. The ground was black. The only visible things anywhere in the cosmos were the headlights of a dozen trucks—vehicles, anyhow—bumbling swiftly toward the spot where they ought to land.

But the spilled air from the side of the chute changed that place. When the two men saw vague variations in the intensity of the darkness below them, they were off the line of the vehicles' approach. Gordon held the shrouds recklessly tight. Air spilled, and they dropped at a slant. . . .

He released the shrouds just in time. The chute jerked at their bodies, and they swayed crazily, and a moment later there was a thrashing of brushwood and they hit solidity with a force to knock the breath from them.

The nearest truck was still almost a mile away. They hauled in frantically on the chute. It was designed to be readily hidden. Gordon found the knotted rope, and pulled on it, and the chute fell apart into ribbons which followed the shrouds to his hands and were almost instantly bundled into a mass which could be carried.

The two men fled at right angles to the trucks' course. They must separate very soon, but first they fled, and found themselves rushing from the very edge of merely thick brushwood into a forest. Gordon, himself, crashed into a fallen tree-trunk and gasped the news. His companion instantly halted. They felt along the trunk until they found the upended mass of roots. They thrust the chute deeply under it, and piled wetted leaves—there had been much rain—on top. Then Gordon cracked one of the igniter-capsules. He panted:

"Luck!"

The other man grunted and fled into the blackness. The chute had to be destroyed lest some development of psionics make it a means for the destruction of the men who had

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landed by it. Gordon headed toward the place where the trucks were stopping. He and the other man would invariably use differing tactics to avoid capture. Gordon, approaching those who hunted for him, saw a faint glare where the headlights were accumulating. He could see tree-trunks and branches by the light. Behind him, the parachute quietly destroyed itself. The other man thrashed away into the distance.

Gordon heard dogs. He was relieved. At least they had nothing of Woodbury's development that would be better than dogs! But the non-psionic science which had discovered shark-repellant for airmen downed at sea had been able —with a little more trouble— to discover a dog-repellant that had no smell to men. Dogs would not trail the two parachutists. Gordon — not knowing what to fear — had feared something more certain.

It was when, for a bare instant, dogs and men alike were silent after the last truck had stopped, that Gordon heard the sound of piston-engines in the sky. Then he swore, though still he was relieved that only such normal, non-psionic methods were in use. That buzzing sound would be a helicopter, searching with a really modern snooper-scope for the warmth of a man's body in the night below. Rain would have helped a great deal, just then.

But it did not come. Gordon found a huge tree. He saw the thickness of its foliage by the barely perceptible glow of the truck-lights. He trampled here and there until he found a wind-drift of fallen, wetted, rotten leaves. He crawled under their unbroken surface. Just before his head was covered, he saw the headlights flick off one by one. Then there were lesser, whiter flickerings. The soldiers were scattering to hunt in the blackness with dogs—which would be useless —and with flashlight beams on their weapons. If they sighted a man and centered him in their light-beams, they would have only to pull trigger to end his fleeing. And there was the increasing, droning sound of the helicopter, coming to search from the sky.

Gordon lay still under the leaves, which might with the foliage conceal his body-heat from the scanner up aloft. He heard the search as it proceeded. He heard the helicopter, droning in circles a thousand feet overhead.

After half an hour, he heard

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the noises when the other man was killed.

When dawn came, Gordon was hidden in the village from which the motor-trucks had come. He'd trailed them back to it, and they hadn't suspected. The achievement was incredible, considering what he had worried about. But the village was incredible, too. At sunrise he was hidden atop the plank ceiling of a long structure in the village itself. He was up underneath its thatched roof, and he could peer out through crevices in the logs of which the peasant-type house was built. He'd gotten to this hut after finding out several astonishing but reasonable facts about the other log houses. They had been modified remarkably, but this was still unchanged from the time when peasants had lived in it. It would probably be made into something else eventually.

The first gray light of morning shone in the village's single street. There was a small-sized horde of featureless human figures there. They worked hastily. As the light grew stronger they gathered tightly together and vanished into a tumble-down structure which once had contained a brick stove, which doubled as a bedstead in cold weather, and the other primitive furnishings of a Siberian peasant's home. Those furnishings were certainly gone now, because at least two hundred men had filed into the hut, though it could not possibly hold fifty. The men had worn uniforms. They had worked on the mud of the street. When the light was strong enough, Gordon could see their work. They had removed every trace of tire-tracks from the highway.

What few human figures remained in view when gray dawn really broke were not in uniform. They wore the shapeless peasant-costume of this area. Some wore shawls and voluminous skirts. Some of those shawled and skirted figures wore moustaches or beards.

Gordon had been prepared for the unprecedented. This was no more than preposterous. He understood this. After daybreak, the slowly moving visible figures would not deceive anybody on the ground, of course, but from overhead —to, say, a robojet taking pictures from high aloft — the village would look exactly like any other squalid, straggling, unsanitary settlement of this region. Only Gordon could see the inconsistencies.

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The largest hut in the village was the one into which the returned trucks had been driven the night before. It might hold two of them. A dozen had rumbled into it. Its entire front was fitted with gigantic hinges, and opened out like a door. There was another dingy structure, and Gordon could see through a narrow window and observe electric lights burning inside. There should be, of course, no electric-light plants within hundreds of miles. He saw a figure on the street. It wore the incredible garments suitable to an inhabitant of such a place, but it lighted a cigarette with an automatic lighter. A lighter would cost a sum equal to a year's income for a Siberian peasant. Through the open doorway of another building he saw a uniformed man briskly operating a typewriter.

Presently an ox-cart came plodding into the village and stopped before one of its fifteen houses. An hour later, the ox-cart plodded slowly and heavily away again. In every respect that could be detected from overhead, the village appeared to support only the activities of a population of fifty or sixty souls. But there had been at least two hundred men working on the street before daybreak, and Gordon grimly surmised garages and mechanics and fuel-stores for the trucks, and a battery of anti-aircraft guns and men and supplies and ammunition for them, and there must have been a communications center and headquarters and the lavish number of men the Russians used for all purposes, and probably a commissariat. There had to be to take care of what obviously was here.

But no sign—yet—of what the Pentagon had most feared.

Not less than five hundred men were hidden and maintained within sight of Gordon's hiding-place. The odds were better that there were five thousand. The house whose front swung open was, of course, the cover for a ramp letting the trucks go underground. The smaller hut into which two hundred men had crowded was obviously the cover of a stair-head leading to subterranean shelters. The houses with electric lights inside, with uniformed men operating typewriters and such modern devices, must also communicate with artificial caverns under the seemingly undisturbed surface earth. There must be corridors and mess-halls and barracks, and storage-rooms and the necessary accommodations for a

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garrison in the thousands. And there was the installation the men and guns were present to protect.

It was a place that had to be hidden so painstakingly and so carefully that the Russians were willing to place it hundreds of miles from any place of known civilization, and with vast inconvenience supply it by hidden means, and garrison it with hundreds or thousands of men.

There was only one place where this particular sort of remoteness and secrecy was required.

It could not be anything but the place to which those "fugitives" from capitalism — about which the Soviets boasted so loudly—were sheltered and interrogated and their brains carefully rinsed of every trace of information the Russians considered important. This was the place where the Russians expected to win the next war. Gordon had been prepared to learn that it was already won. He'd been sent as a last resort to make them lose it. That, succinctly, was that.

He waited very patiently, watching from his hiding-place. He considered that to all intents and purposes he was as dead as if his throat had been cut two weeks ago. But he hoped intensely that when he was literally killed it would be quickly, and after he'd killed Woodbury, or else that he'd have a chance to dislodge that special tooth-cap which would arrange a sudden demise for him. Even leaving Woodbury and his mission aside, Gordon did not want the Russians to announce that another key figure in the "decadent, capitalist-warmongering American system of enslaved scientists" had asked for asylum in the USSR. He did not want them to announce that he—Gordon—was fully cooperative and giving all the information he possessed about the capitalistic spy-networks in Russia. Most of all, he did not want to help the Russians develop that science of psionics which was in a primitive state even in America—because Woodbury was lost—but which promised such tremendous ultimate results. He did not believe that he could be made to help in psionic research. He was convinced that the creative function of his brain would be destroyed if his will broke and he was turned into a half-mad robot hysterically obsessed with a need to obey his Russian captors. He would much rather be killed than

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run the risk of being mistaken about that!

He had, if humanly possible, or even if not, to kill his former friend and colleague Woodbury, who had "escaped" to asylum in the Soviet Union. Woodbury had to be killed because he knew too much that other American scientists did not fully understand, and the Russians might get it out of him. Gordon had to be the man to kill him, because Gordon might conceivably be able to turn the results of Woodbury's work against him. Nobody else was so likely to be capable of that trick.

Woodbury's "flight" to Russia was not exactly voluntary. When he was missed, the door of his bedroom had been broken down, and he had killed two still-unidentified persons who seemed to have come to help him flee. He had been heard shouting for help as he was carried off. All of which was typical of similar flights of other Americans to Russia. Very few competent scientists risked going anywhere alone, these days, for fear of finding themselves in flight from their native land. Some had been killed while resisting the urge to flee. The urge usually consisted of grim figures with automatic pistols who had cars or planes ready to carry out the flight, and who would shoot down anybody including the fugitives if they were resisted.

In short, kidnapping had become a recognized technique in the cold war. The Russians seemed to believe it would solve the problem of making a hot war successful.

In the case of Woodbury, there was a grisly chance that they might be right. It was he who had found those first, obscure linkages between the fact of mind and the behavior of matter. He was fumbling at practical application of psionic forces which previously had been treated only in highly speculative writings. The Russians hadn't kidnapped him for that, but as a top-rank physicist. And they had brain-washed him and reconditioned his mind and now they were trying to make it work for them. Gordon believed that they couldn't tame his intellect without mutilating it, but even Woodbury's crippled intellect would be too good to let the Russians have. If he were anywhere, it should be here. If he were here it was worth any conceivable risk to deny his possible achievements to the USSR. Gordon's job was to try to attend to that matter before he was killed.

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Though there were no signs so far that the Russians had gotten any unprecedented devices from their captive, it became very evident during that long morning that Gordon's assignment was humanly impossible. The protection of this place was simply too good. Gordon couldn't even send back word of the nature of the defenses, so that later men might be better equipped to crash them. Literally the only thing Gordon could do would be to try to slip into the rabbit-warrens underground and somehow try blindly to find Woodbury and die with him. The odds against success were astronomical. Gordon had simply been thrown away. All the years and hopes and training and ideals he had known were simply wasted because of a lack of information at Counter-Intelligence back in Washington. He couldn't even supply information to correct that lack! The job had been underestimated, and he was going to get killed to no purpose.

So he watched the completely artificial activities of the village for a desperately tedious long day, and made chimerical plans to take advantage of infinitely unlikely breaks if they should come. There was nothing else to do.

Near sundown, just before the light began to fade, he turned to examine his hiding-place, to refresh his memory so he could crawl out of it without making any suspicious noises. He had finished his reexamination when he noticed something up at the very peak of the roof, under the ridge-pole. It was quite small. It was inconspicuous. The wire leading from it was very carefully concealed. But he saw it, and he recognized it.

It was a very tiny television scanner. It had been watching him ever since he crawled into this hiding-place.

It was not a psionic device, but a wholly conventional object. But Gordon flew into the sort of rage which fills a man when he knows that people who intend to kill him—or worse—have been laughing at him.

When darkness fell again, still nothing had happened. The television unit gave no sign of activity. It had no moving parts larger than electrons, so activity would not show. It could be observing him by infra-red even in the dark. And it would be typically Russian to have such spy-devices everywhere about a military installation. Every

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foot of underground passageways as well as all the environs of the village might be constantly surveyed by such small devices. There would be microphones, too, for eavesdropping. It would be very, very Russian. But it would be even more Russian for part of the equipment to be out of order and unrepaired.

Darkness settled down upon the village. Gordon saw blackout curtains drawn. He saw men verify that no flicker of electric light escaped into the night. And then there was the absolute uneventfulness of nighttime in a dreary Siberian village. Nothing happened. It seemed that nothing could happen. Yet somewhere nearby there were barracks and troops and antiaircraft guns. There might be five thousand men waiting for Gordon to move. Also, Woodbury might be underground not far away.

Gordon swore very softly to himself. He crawled soundlessly to the back of this attic, which he now knew had been prepared for a hideout so that anybody who made use of it could be watched. The feeling that he had been observed from the instant of his entry into this village was at once infuriating and utterly frustrating. The flap of loose thatch by which he had entered the attic had been prepared for him. When he crawled out, it could be into the waiting arms of grinning Soviet soldiers.

Against that event, Gordon reached into his thick and shapeless clothing. Maybe every move he made was watched. But maybe even the Russian spy-service hadn't worked out the use of high-explosives as textile materials. Gordon happened to be wearing, as clothing, some five pounds of dynitol. It could be detonated where it was, or it could be packed into any suitable hole for demolition-charge effect. Gordon arranged, his eyes burning, that he could blast himself and everything around him within ten yards into rather complete wreckage.

But nobody was waiting when he crawled to the ground from his hiding-place. And it might mean anything, or absolutely nothing at all. The scanner in the attic might have reported faithfully, or it could be out of operation. It was most likely that he was watched every instant by men who were amused at him. Yet he might not be watched at all.

Such uncertainty was not exactly restful.

He went across the muddy

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street in the darkness. The plans he'd made before discovering the scanner were precisely as good now as they had ever been—which was probably not much. He went leisurely into the tumble-down hut that covered a stairway leading underground. A voice challenged, and then grunted:

"Hah! I thought you were an officer."

Gordon growled in reply. He smelled of long bathlessness, and it was proof that he was not an officer. Sentries in a place as elaborately guarded as this did not really suspect anybody. The precautions were too elaborate. The most a sentry feared was that he might be caught by an officer in a breach of regulations.

Gordon went down the muddy steps. There was a four-foot wide corridor below. There was a smell of dampness, of concrete, of the uncleanliness of a Russian barrack. He heard snores; and knew that he passed close by some sleeping-compartment. He went on, cautiously, and smelled greasy cookery. He passed as tensely through more corridor-space, and there was a stairway leading down to a lower level, and he heard voices and laughter and Russian profanity. It was a recreation-room for troops off-duty. It occurred to Gordon that undoubtedly that recreation-room had scanners in it, and hidden microphones.

These corridors might be equipped the same way! He had progressed for some hundreds of yards without encountering a single human being. Maybe the scanners in the corridors were the reason.

Gordon cursed himself for a fool. Of course that was it! He'd anticipated it, he'd been ready for it, he'd forgotten it! This was a mousetrap and he was a mouse. He had walked into the trap and every movement he made was watched and every sound overheard. He stopped short and ground his teeth.

Seconds later he heard footsteps approaching him. They came directly toward him, echoing hollowly between walls. There was a side-corridor opening to the left, just here. Logically, he should have dodged down that side-corridor to avoid an encounter. But he knew he was watched. Therefore, the man had been sent to cause him to dodge down that left-hand passage. They would expect to turn him deftly this way and that, to exactly the spot they wished to have him reach, and

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there they would overwhelm him.

Rage rose in him. Then he did move into the side corridor. But he flattened himself against the wall, just past the junction with the original passage. He listened.

The approaching footsteps hesitated. They almost stopped. The unseen man had been warned. The scanners? The footsteps came on, purposefully.

Gordon waited until the last possible fraction of a second. Then in one motion he ducked and dived. Instead of plunging out upright, he flung himself at the man's calves.

It was singularly effective. The man was ready, but not for that. He collapsed over Gordon's plunging body. There was the scraping of steel on concrete, followed by a peculiarly satisfying thwacking sound as the Russian's head hit the concrete floor. A bayonet rang metallically. The soldier had drawn it, prepared to meet Gordon's rush with cold steel. But he hadn't expected a low tackle. He was out.

Gordon fumbled fiercely at the unconscious man's body. He dragged away a small, compact box with wires extending from it. There was a tiny hearing-aid-type earphone, and an even tinier throat-mike. It was almost precisely like those short-range short-wave sets that are used on television stages, to direct the technical staff from the control-room. This man had been sent to herd Gordon this way or that, and he'd needed to receive instructions constantly.

Gordon said coldly into the throat-mike, in Russian:

"I've knocked your man cold. Suppose you send some more men to take care of me. I promise them some good combat-practice!"

His mission had failed. He was a dead man. He ground his teeth and almost foamed with fury. Almost he was tempted to make use of the tooth-cap that would bring death quickly, but he was too angry. They had played with him. They could kill him at any instant. But he was filled with such blind fury that he could not consider dying without taking others with him.

There was a pause. Then a very tiny humming sound from his fingers. The hearing-aid earphone was making noises. He put it to his ear. A suave voice said:

"Comrade spy, you know that we could have killed you any time we chose. Now that

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you know you are helpless, wait a moment. We may make you a proposal. Or we may not."

Gordon found himself snarling. He knew better than to accept any offer that might be made him. Still, they might think him an even greater fool than he was. He frenziedly longed to make his death costly. He could race back to that recreation-room and detonate his dynatol-garments in the middle of off-duty soldiers. But that would destroy only cannon-fodder—men no more valuable than himself. He did not hate Russian private soldiers. His flaming fury was directed toward the directors of such monstrosities as this installation had been created for. He yearned to kill the men who kidnapped honest scientists and brainwashed them and turned them into bright-eyed robots who publicly broadcast acknowledgements of lies; into zombies who obediently said and did anything their captors required. Especially Gordon longed to destroy those who had broken Woodbury — a man and a brother-scientist and an American—and turned him into what they had made him.

The voice said placidly in his ear, in English:

"Comrade spy, you know that we can kill you. Probably you are prepared to kill yourself. But we will make a bargain. You would not be sent here as an ordinary spy. You should have very special training. We have a problem. If you will solve it, we will let you go."

Gordon said savagely:

"Yes? To permit me to tell what this place is like? The hell you will!"

The voice did not comment. Instead it said, almost humorously:

"The problem was presented by the American Woodbury. He was a refugee from the United States. He underwent conditioning, and he became extremely anxious to aid us in our researches. But we doubt that the conditioning may have destroyed the finer qualities of his brain. If you can solve this for us, it will determine whether we carry our conditioning quite so far on other fugitives."

"You mean," said Gordon coldly—he was so filled with hate that it went past the point of being felt—"you mean you think you've been torturing people past the point of usefulness. And you want me to settle the question."

He stood in a damp, stinking corridor underground. The man he had tackled

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breathed stentoriously at his feet. Gordon was in the middle of an enemy stronghold, watched by scanners every instant, and there was no human power that could possibly help him.

The voice said cordially:

"Precisely! Precisely! If we torment our helpers too much, and you convince us of the fact, we will not carry matters so far hereafter. So you may do your fugitive countrymen a favor if you solve our problem."

Gordon said icily:

"Well?"

"Take what precautions you please," said the voice in his ear," and follow the lighted corridors. We will arrange the lighting to guide you. You will come presently to a room in which there is an electronic device. You will tell us what it was designed to do."

Gordon snarled. "I need more information than that!"

The voice explained in the same amiable fashion:

"Woodbury made it. We required that he explain its theory before it was completed. His explanation was absurd. It was not only contrary to dialectical materialism, it was not even materialistic! It was ridiculous! He babbled of thought as if it were an immaterial thing-in-itself! He spoke of thought as a reality capable of physical effects! Perhaps he hoped to deceive us. He could have gone mad. When we reasoned with him to tell us the actual truth, he died. And we still do not know if he was mad, or if he tried deception."

Gordon felt pure horror. He had two complete justifications for it. The first was that Woodbury had plainly been tortured to death because he had made a device the Russians could not understand, and the second was that he had not been mad. He had told the truth! He had given them psionic principles, which not only their minds but even their memories rejected as gibberish. Woodbury could have told them the truth because he knew they would not believe it, but he had died because he could not invent lies they could accept.

"You will examine the device," said the amused voice, "and you will tell us what it should do. From your answer we will know how far a scientific mind can be rearranged before its sanity departs."

"And then," said Gordon, "you will kill me or else try to enslave me too."

The voice in the tiny headphone said placidly:

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"Nevertheless you may save your compatriots some suffering."

Gordon swallowed, with a dry throat. The threat to himself did not seem too great. He had five pounds of high explosive set to detonate next to his body. There was that special cap on his tooth. Being warned, they could not seize him without his being able to set off the dynatol or swallow the pellet from his tooth. And he might be able to do damage where it would count. . . .

"For the hell of it," said Gordon harshly, "and just on the offchance that I may help some poor devil, I'll do it. But you won't take me alive!"

"Follow the lighted corridors," said the voice in his ear, complacently, "and take what precautions you please."

Gordon moved. He was infinitely careful. He followed the lighted corridor. When it branched, he looked down both ways with his hand on the detonating device that would turn him into a human bomb. He loosened the tooth-cap. They could not seize him!

It was nearly three hundred yards before he saw a lighted door and a lighted room ahead. It was obviously a laboratory, large and brilliantly illuminated. On a table were storage batteries and a device which was partly radio tubes and partly peculiarly-shaped reflectors of metal, and partly a double helix behind a copper Moebius strip. He approached with the most desperate caution and alertness that could possibly be imagined. He reached the door and put out a careful hand.

Then his head was sagging, and he was seated in a chair, stripped of all his clothing. His jaw hurt and the precautionary tooth-cap was gone from inside his mouth, and he was wrapped in a veritable cocoon of cordage which bound him immovably. He could not stir any part of his body but his head.

A pink-cheeked, cherubic-looking Russian in uniform nodded amiably at him. There were other men in the room. It was the laboratory. The same peculiar electronic device reposed on a table some ten feet from Gordon's chair.

"Ah!" said the Russian blandly. It was the voice of the tiny ear-phone. "You are with us again!"

Gordon tasted blood. He realized that not only the one special tooth-cap had been removed, but other dental work put in to replace it. They'd made sure he could not poison himself!

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The pink-faced Russian glowed happily.

"An American made the device that stunned you," he said brightly. "He was quite resistant, but presently he became cooperative and we asked him for a death-ray. He made a device which projects ultrasonic waves in air, with ten kilowatts of maximum output."

Even in his state of dazed despair, some part of Gordon's brain came up with the fact that a sound-track delivers no more than fifteen watts of power turned into sound. Ten kilowatts of sound would kill anything!

"We have been able to restrict it so that a sufficiently short blast does not kill, but merely stuns — instantly. We find that it is not a really practical death-ray because its range is limited. I suspect that you Americans might try to use it as an anaesthetic. But we do not study anaesthetics here! Quite the reverse!"

Gordon cursed him, thickly. He could understand it, now. So much of pure sound would paralyze a living being before any possible reflex could operate a detonator.

The Russian smirked, his head to one side.

"Now to business! You know that you will tell us what we ask. The only question is how much you will suffer before you do so. There will be no difference except to yourself, and it is no greater treason to speak comfortably than to scream. You may examine this device. It is what the American Woodbury made. Do you know what it is?"

Gordon stared at it. He felt himself going slowly gray as he realized that this was everything he had feared Woodbury might accomplish for his captors. This part of the apparatus was a development of a psionic theory Woodbury had held as a mere speculation a year ago, and that part was proof that another theory had been found to be mistaken. The Moebius strip was the solution of a problem of unipolarity. The helix—

Gordon's brain told him what the device had been meant to be. He even felt a peculiar, numbed admiration for the brilliant thinking behind it. But horror filled him. He could see that it was incomplete. He could even tell what was needed to complete it. Yet he would never have been able to design it himself. It was the utterly perfect demonstration of the way Woodbury's mind worked. When he

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had finished the set-up for an experiment, it was characteristic of his experimental designs that they made beautifully clear what they were meant to demonstrate, and that the facts of the experiment could not possibly be more perfectly shown by any other design of parts. But this was psionics, carried past theory to action! This thing could—

Horror filled Gordon to the exclusion of every other possible emotion. This could end the cold war, certainly! No nation with this could possibly fail to win *any* war! Even the United States—of sheer necessity—would use a device like this to end the present situation of intolerable international strain. There would not even be a battle. There would not be even a bombing. This was victory! But the Russians had it; Why hadn't they—

The pink-cheeked Russian laughed softly as Gordon blinked in sudden incredulous understanding.

"I see," said the Russian amiably," that you know what it is. Name it!"

Gordon's throat worked. Woodbury had made it, and he would have known the one truth the Russians could not penetrate. He'd have told them the truth about this device. Gordon said in a thin whisper:

"It's a teleporter."

"Splendid!" said the cherubic man. "Then why does not your nation use it?"

"Woodbury," said Gordon in the same thin, uncontrollable whisper, "was working on it. He—hadn't worked out all the theory when you kidnaped him. It's—complete now. The theory is. But the machine isn't complete."

The short stout Russian rubbed his hands.

"Most cooperative!" he said in bland approval. "Now tell us what parts are missing, Comrade spy!"

Gordon swallowed blood. His eyes could not tear themselves from the device. It was agony to see it, so plainly a design in Woodbury's own manner, so magnificently intelligible once you knew the bare beginning of the principles by which it worked. It was crystal-clear — if you could accept the principles behind it. But it was utterly cryptic if you did not know elementary theoretic psionics. And if you could not accept any but strictly materialistic ideas, you could not even grasp psionics. The Russians had the domination of the world in this underground

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room. It was as obvious as ABC. But the Russians would not use the mental alphabet of the rest of the world.

"There should—" said Gordon thickly, while his eyes devoured the machine and his brain knew swiftly that this feature of its operation was controlled so, and this operation was governed by that, and the sequence of operational instructions had to follow this exact pattern. Woodbury had been infinitely intelligent in designing this machine! "There should be," said Gordon, "a quarter-sphere reflector, and a quarter-circle bar, and a spidery plate to integrate all the settings before it can operate. The quarter-sphere reflector belongs half a diameter from that Moebius strip."

"Splendid!" said the pink-cheeked man happily. "My assistants will assemble it under your instructions."

Gordon looked at him almost incredulously. It was a fact that the device which was so clear to him did not have any meaning to any of the technicians in this room. Then he realized that they could not grasp that the crude and bulky condenser beside the helix had to be so massive because it must not only have such-and-such a capacity, but such-and-such a mass. The Moebius strip had to have not only a single surface, but it had to be of a specific diameter. The helix had to have that precise ratio between the number of turns in its inner and outer coils. . . .

He licked his lips and told exactly how the quarter-sphere should be placed. A technician bolted it into place.

"Before—before you put on the curved bar," said Gordon unsteadily, "the left-hand bank of tubes has to be lighted. It has to have a certain field in existence when the bar is put in place."

The technician started to put the bar in backwards. Gordon told him, dry-throated, to turn it around. He obeyed. Gordon was bound so tightly that he literally could not move a finger. He was not quite ten feet from the device.

The pink-cheeked man now smiled angelically at Gordon.

"Now," he said happily, "we stop! Now you tell us how the device operates! The remaining part is the manual control. Woodbury expected to assemble that, and to be allowed to shift the device to make it operate. But we stopped him. We stop you. You do understand this machine. It is

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not a new machine. The United States makes use of it. Two men would not know how to make a truly new device which Woodbury had invented for us!"

He beamed at Gordon. He wiped his lips. He giggled.

"Both of you," he said happily, "used the word 'teleporter.' Once, for deception, a new device of warfare was called a 'tank.' There have been code words for innumerable operations. 'Teleporter' is a code word for—" He giggled again. "For the most secret of American atomic-fission devices, is it not? Woodbury made a device which has not a particle of radio-active substance in it, and he hoped to set it to operating and so to explode in this room, did he not? He was quite sane, was he not—and trying to avoid cooperating with us by pretending that he was making something else while actually he made an atomic bomb?"

He made a gesture. Two men came from the side of the room. They carried small devices which Gordon knew would turn him sick if they reached his eyes.

"Woodbury was sane," said the pink-cheeked man happily, "and he was very clever. So we *can* apply much more pressure—you will call it torture—before we destroy a scientific intellect! Now you will explain the theory of this atomic bomb, Comrade spy. You will explain it so we can duplicate this apparatus and explode it—safely far away—and then we will reward you. Then we will let you alone! You have no idea how wonderful the idea of being let alone can become! But you will learn!"

He chuckled and giggled to himself as the two men approached Gordon.

He looked at the device Woodbury had made. He thought, very carefully, the things that must be the first order of instruction to a psionic device, and then he thought the things that simply had to be the second order of instructions, and then he thought fiercely of something else. . . .

The walls of the room faded into mistiness. They melted as if they had turned to fog and the fog had evaporated. The lights of the room abruptly went out and there was no illumination anywhere except the tubes of the device itself. All the tubes were lighted now—the first bank had turned them on when the mental instructions were completed. They had needed special volt-

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ages, so of course they were operated by batteries.

Then other lights glowed faintly in what seemed illimitable distance outside, and they flared swiftly into very great brightness indeed, and suddenly there were other walls in view. But they were farther away than the underground room's walls had been, and there were desks against the walls, and men were starting up from them.

Sounds came. Shoutings, which swelled from faintness to full volume. There was a circle of flooring, quite neatly removed from everything connected with the underground Siberian installation, which now appeared to be in a very peculiar place indeed. On that circle was the device Woodbury had made. Gordon was there, bound helplessly in his chair. The pink-cheeked Russian was there, suddenly aghast and unbelieving, and the technicians, and the torture-instruments. But the neat circle of plans was no longer in Siberia. It rested—teleported—in the room of foreign desks in Counter-Espionage, in Washington, and the men starting up from their desks wore United States uniforms, and the guards called in by their shouts carried typical American rifles — and they were ready and anxious to fight.

Gordon shouted:

"Get those Russkies, quick! And turn me loose! Here's a gadget Woodbury made!"

There were rifles pointed at everybody by that time. The guards and staff of Counter-Espionage took over very efficiently, if amazedly. They took no chances at all. They even held guns on Gordon until he was completely unwrapped and released and had been fully identified.

It was less than an hour before the highest of all military authorities listened carefully to Gordon. The foreign-desk room of Counter-Espionage was no longer occupied by men who evaluated reports from abroad. It was occupied only by the circle of planking and the device on the table, and by Gordon, explaining to the high brass.

"Woodbury made it," he said carefully. "That is, he designed it and had the Russians make the parts, while he was their prisoner. After they thought they'd cracked his brain. But they got suspicious when he almost had it put together. They took him away and tried to make him explain the theory. And he fooled them. They couldn't

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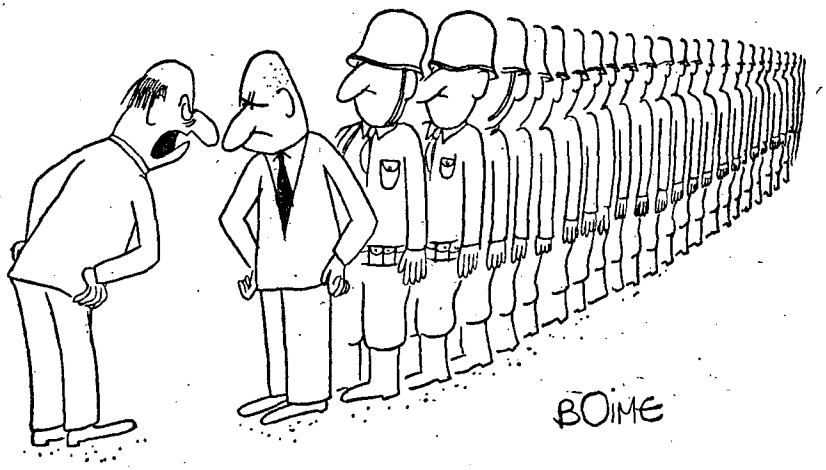
have believed him, even if he told them the absolute truth to the last detail. They're conditioned so that they can't believe there are realities which are immaterial. They can't believe anything that contradicts their basic assumptions of what can be true, and what can't. They're conditioned to dialectical materialism and all it implies. Their minds are frozen! So they couldn't believe that thought could affect matter—though we move our bodies and build cities—and they tortured Woodbury until he died, trying to get him to tell them something they could believe. They simply couldn't believe there could really be a teleporter. Its basic principles are things these people *can't* believe!"

The array of top brass examined the machine. Gordon answered questions, but with reserve. Nobody who is really security-conscious wants to know secrets he does not have to know for the proper performance of his duty. Presently he was explaining how he'd made use of Woodbury's creation.

"The Russians couldn't understand it," he repeated, "and they especially couldn't understand that a manual control wasn't necessary. Thought alone could trigger it! Once you know the first thing about psionics, you see not only how it does work, but why it has to, and how to control it—and even something else that it can



"Oh, yeah? You and what army?"

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do. You see, this thing can not only transfer itself from any place to any other, with a circle of space around it. It can be set to teleport things from other places to here!"

High military authority did not understand and—wisely—preferred not to know matters it did not fully need. But one major-general did observe somewhat grimly that there could be repercussions, if a circle of flooring and a mysterious device and a certain number of Russians had vanished from the heart of a Siberian fortress. They were scared, anyhow. If they thought some new scientific device had just been completed to be used against Russia, they might start a shooting war in pure funk.

"Woodbury'd thought of that," said Gordon, painstakingly. "He was set to handle it as soon as he escaped. If you'll bring in some guards to handle a few upset individuals, and if you arrange for some high-level illegality, we can do a little kidnaping ourselves. As I said, this machine will teleport anything from anywhere to here, if it's set for it. Any*thing* includes any*body*. If we start plucking loose the members of the Politburo from wherever they are, and then work on down, by daybreak we can have the USSR so thoroughly disorganized that they *can't* start a war! We'll have all the people who could order hostilities started, locked up right here in the city jail in Washington! And then we won't even have to worry about a cold war!"

And so it was done.

An odd idea came to Gordon as the startled, frantic, bewildered men from Russia began to arrive in improvised reception-chambers at Counter-Intelligence headquarters. There was an old saying that if a man made a better mousetrap, the world would beat a path to his door. These hysterical great ones of the Soviet Union, snatched mysteriously from their proper places to be made harmless to the world—they weren't exactly beating a path to Washington, but the result was the same. It had to be the same!

This better mousetrap worked beautifully!

THE END

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One of the nicer things about going through the back files of Fantastic *and* Amazing *is the enjoyable frequency with which we turn up stories as memorable as Col. Keller's classic "The Worm." When we re-ran it for you last September—in the first issue of the* new Fantastic*—it drew so much favorable mail that now, as a sort of anniversary celebration, we offer you another fine "Kelleryarn," this one about three of the damnedest Soviet agents we ever heard of—and a famous American scientist who developes a toxin potent enough to wipe out what every s-f reader would rather die than lose—his sense of tomorrow!*

NO MORE TOMORROWS

DAVID H. KELLER, M.D.

In thinking over the great disaster of my life I am always impressed with the fact that I came near success. There was only a hairbreadth between success and my ambitions. It is true that I failed, but I am not the first man who failed because of too great trust in a woman.

The idea would never have come to me had it not been for a peculiar combination of circumstances. First came the fact that I was, by years of labor, one of the greatest of psychological workers in the entire world; perhaps it would be better to state that I was not one of the greatest, but *the* greatest. Then came the failure on Wall Street and the loss of my entire fortune. At that time, when I needed ready cash, the thought came to me, and I lost no time in capitalizing it.

Fortunately for me the Internationale had agents in New York. I had heard of them, their activity and their unlimited funds. Within three days I had arranged for a conference.

There were three of them. To this day I know of them only by their numbers. "Twenty-one" seemed to be the leader. He was a small one-eyed man with a head that seemed to be a constant burden to him on account of its unusual size. It needed to be large to hold all the store of knowledge he possessed. "Forty-seven"

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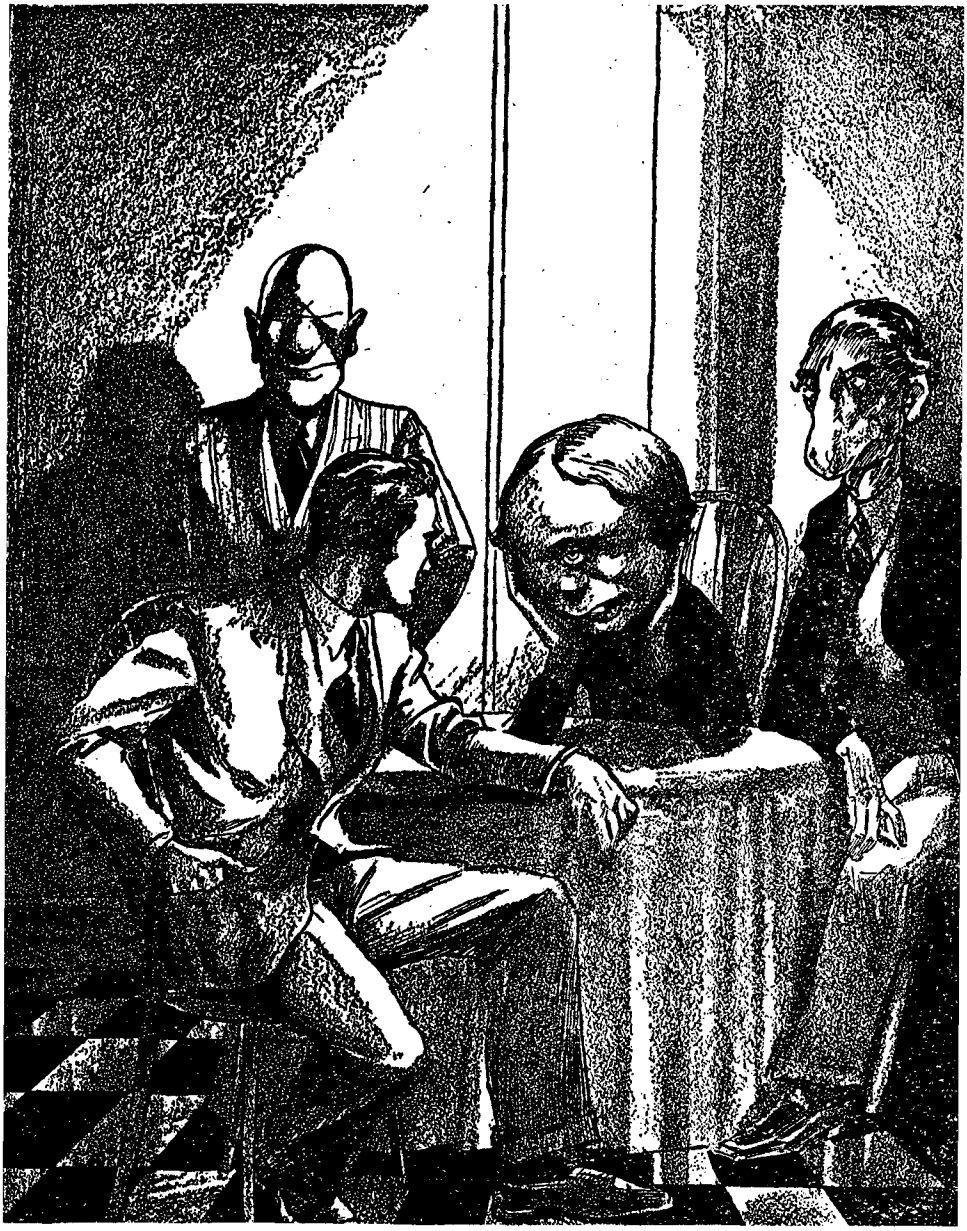

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looked like an idiot. He had the largest nose I have ever seen on anyone; it seemed to start at the hair line and, sweeping down over the face in a generous curve, ended within a short distance of his chin. In talking he used that nose as a trumpet, varying the tone and volume by partly closing one or both nostrils with the tips of his fingers. He was nauseating to look at but adorable to listen to. "Thirty-four" was a blind man with one arm. I thought for a long time that he had lost it in the late war, but one night I found that he had a very short arm growing out of the shoulder.

"Twenty-one," "Forty-seven," "Thirty-four"—these were the men Russia had placed in America to undermine our social fabric, and make us easy plucking, when the day of final reckoning came. These were the three men I met in the back room of a slum restaurant the night that I sold everything I valued for the gold they had so much of.

They sat there on three sides of the table. "Twenty-one," as usual, supporting his hydrocephalic head in his hands, elbows on table; "Forty-seven" humming a Mozart melody through his nasal trombone, and "Thirty-four," his face with hollow sockets twitching pitifully, tapping nervously on the table with the one hand that was able to reach it. No wonder I was nervous and slightly nauseated, for, though I had a wonderful idea, I was not at all sure of my ability to convince them of its worth.

"The human brain," I began, "is the organ which differentiates man from the lower forms of life. We, the human race, the *Genus Homo*, owe our supremacy to the great development of that brain. The mid-stem, the cerebellum, is similar in anatomy and function to that of lower types, but when we consider the cerebrum, the two hemispheres, the various lobes with their twisted convolutions, their deep sutures, then we see what makes us more than animals and only a little less than gods.

"Gentlemen, I ask you a question. What do we do with those lobes of the bilateral cerebrum? We accumulate knowledge. Once we acquire a fact, that fact is never lost, at the worst it is only inaccessible in our subconscious, awaiting the proper stimuli to cross the threshold and become the property of our conscious ego. So, we acquire knowledge.

"In other words, we remember what we have learned and that mental quality is called memory. How far back does memory extend? Who knows? Freud, Adler, Jung, White, all of them, quarrel over the question. They cannot agree as to whether memory can be inherited or only acquired. I, as a psychologist, have my

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opinions, but why bother you with what I think!

"For there is something more important to consider tonight. I am thinking of the mental power of preparing for the future. Ah! That power indeed is possessed only by man. The squirrel buries a nut, but, forgetting where, allows it to grow into a tree; the mason-wasp may place food in an earthen cell, but she fails to see that the scientist, Fabre, has carefully cut the bottom out of the cell, destroying its usefulness.

"Man prepares for the future. He does it not only as an individual, but as a nation, and almost as a race. Working in the todays of life, all his plans, ambitions and desires are located in his tomorrows. How have the great nations of history attained to their fame? By carefully planning the future of their national life. Every rich man has become such by having a vision of the future and then making a program for his tomorrows. Am I right?

They agreed with me. The truth was axiomatic. There was no need of argument. In fact, I gave them credit for seeing where my argument was leading me, before I reached the middle of it. So, I went on:

"In every nation there are at best a hundred men who have a sufficient mental force to plan for the future life of their commonwealths. They sit and dream, and then translate their dreams into economic and militaristic programs, which, they hope, will make their nation greater. These men are not concerned with the naval tonnage of today. What they want to know is the ratios that will exist between them and their rivals ten years, thirty years from now. They live in the future. They can only look one way—forward. Historians backward turn their piercing gaze through the vanished centuries, but those dreamers think only of the history that will be made in the years to come.

"All the nations have their eyes set on Russia. They know that she is a sleeping giant, a terrific entity that so far has not learned to apply its power. The nations fear Russia, and the dreamers of all the nations are preparing for all the tomorrows, when the Great Bear will come down from the Ural Mountains.

"Your country faces a superhuman task in its plan to socialize the world. You also have your dreamers. I know that you have plans for the next ten, the next fifty years. But the nations are playing a game of chess with you, and their intelligentia is at least as brilliant as yours.

"Now here is my thought. Suppose something should happen to the one hundred great thinkers in a dozen of the supreme countries of this earth? Suppose that some-

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thing should happen simultaneously to all of them? And what if this something prevented them from paying any more attention to the tomorrows of their nations? Can you visualize what would happen with England, France, Italy, Japan, the United States, and a half dozen more, simply living in the todays of life? Legislation would collapse for lack of leadership. Finances would become despairing wrecks. The economic foundations of the world would be shaken. Armies would disappear, and navies would rust away in the harbors. Only Russia would plan, only your country would be able to progress, and, whenever you wished to, you could crush the rival nations as a steam roller crushes out the ruts in an earthen road. And that is the idea I want to sell you."

"Magnificent!" shrieked "Twenty-one."

"Beautiful!" whistled "Forty-seven" through his trombone.

"But an impossible nightmare," sighed "Thirty-four," his pallid face twitching as he threw aside my plan as a fantastic dream.

"I am a psychologist," I continued, not in the least dismayed by their criticisms, (for I knew the real truth of the theory). "For years I have studied the human brain, normal and abnormal. With scalpel, and every known instrument of precision, I dug into that greatest of all creations. And some time ago I found out something that no one in the whole world knows. *I located the brain center which enables man to visualize the future and plan for it. I have found out the part of the brain where he keeps his tomorrows.*

"That in itself is an achievement of note. But," and here I lowered my voice to a whisper, "what would you think if I told you that I have isolated a toxin, so specific, so powerful, that it can be given to a man in his food, just a few drops, and at once the ability of this *Tomorrow Center* is destroyed. It ceases to function. The man lives on as he has always done, but he has no more tomorrows."

"You say it can be given in food?" whined "Forty-seven."

"A drop or two in a grape, or in a glass of wine?" trembled "Twenty-one."

"I see it all! I can leap forward and in imagination visualize the results!" cried "Thirty-four." "It will make Russia ruler of the universe overnight."

"You are confident of your ability?" asked "Forty-seven."

"Absolutely!" and I was confident. More than that, I knew that these representatives of the greatest power in the world believed me, and would pay me well for the formula necessary to manufacture the drug. The manner of giving it, the ways that

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would have to be devised to finish the treatment, why, that was their business. So, I simply smiled at them as I repeated:

"Absolutely!"

They believed me. It was not even thought necessary to consult with the higher men in the Internationale. There would be no signatures, they said, and no incriminating document, but ten thousand dollars that very night and ten million upon the delivery of the first four ounces of the drug with the complete directions for making it.

We shook hands on it, and "Forty-seven," pulling from his pocket a roll of bills, counted out twenty $500 "yellow boys." At the sight of what he had left, I cursed myself. I could have had ten times ten thousand without protest, but I knew the other money would be soon mine. And Leonora would be mine. She had resisted the love of an unknown scientist, but when she knew that she could help in the spending of ten million dollars, what would she say? And there would be more than that. These men had told me that if the medicine worked, I could have anything I asked of Russia—anything I wanted, and they would be glad to give me my slightest desire, because of the great gift I had handed them.

I wanted to tell Leonora about it that very night, but I had to go to the laboratory. Every moment was precious; with millions awaiting me, there could be no delay. Once in the workshop, I telephoned to her, whispering that I had real news and that I would see her soon. Was it foolish of me to end by saying that soon I would be able to give her all she had ever desired of life, everything she had ever dreamed of?

From the time I hung up the receiver there was intense work. I worked and slept and ate and worked, and, as I watched the precious drops come out of the Berkfield filter into the sterilized glass beneath, I knew that they were more than so many minums of devastating toxin. Far more! Each drop meant golden dollars, precious moments of happiness with Leonora.

At last I was through. My agreement with the Russian representatives called for a first delivery of ten cubic centimeters of the drug. This was enough for experiments on ten men. If this experiment was satisfactory, I was to be given one million dollars and was to start at once with the preparation of sufficient of the drug to paralyze the ambitions of great men all over the world. On the delivery of the final amount, there were to be nine million more handed me, and if it all worked as I said it would, perhaps ninety million more would be given me

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by the world's grateful mistress.

I was to meet the men at twelve o'clock that night. At five I had finished my task. The 10 cc. were in a glass-stoppered bottle. I had it safe in my right hand vest pocket. In the left hand vest pocket was a similar bottle filled with water. Held to the light, both bottles looked alike, one on one side and one on the other. I wanted to show them to Leonora. For that night I was going to dine with her. Days of hard work and nights of tedious watching had separated us; now there was going to be an evening of pleasure and some pardonable boasting.

We ate in a semi-private alcove of a New York restaurant. I presume the food was good. All I can remember is how much like a wonder-woman the lady of my heart looked that night. She had always been inclined to tease me a little about my inability to succeed, but when I gave her the diamond pendant, she knew, she could not help but know, that I had struck my pace.

Then I told her all, slowly, with microscopic exactness, I told her the entire story. I saw her shiver as I described the head of Twenty-one, the nose of Forty-seven, the blind face of the one-armed Thirty-four. But when I spoke of the millions, she flushed and breathed deep, and I knew then that she was a woman with a price and I could at last buy her.

Very carefully I explained what I intended to do. How with the destruction of their tomorrows the leaders of the universe would lie prostrate and helpless before the Great Bear. In words of one syllable I described the centers of the brain, and told of my great discovery; and then I showed her the two bottles.

"Just like water, you see, My Dear," I explained. "Think of it! A cook in our employ places a teaspoon of this liquid in a cup of coffee and a great man drinks that cupful. From that time he becomes useless to his country. He simply lives in his todays. Imagine a hundred of the leaders of England all being similarly affected in one day. Before substitutions could be made for them the British Isles could be overrun."

"And they will do that to France, and Italy and our United States?" asked the simple minded beauty.

"Yes, to the whole world."

"And you will be great, rich and powerful?"

"I will be everything you want me to be. Think of it! Able to give you anything you want."

"And it is all in that bottle?"

"Yes."

"Suppose we drink of the the one bottle. A toast to your success, and my happiness."

So I emptied the one bottle into our wine glasses and we

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drank. And then I put the other bottle back in my vest pocket. It was past ten, and for a while we just chatted. Then the woman started to laugh, at first a little chuckle, then low rippling peals like, murmuring waterfalls. Of course, I wanted to know what she was amused at, and she did not hesitate to answer me.

"You have done something for me tonight that I can never repay you for. And I have done something for you that you will never forget. All my life I have worried about the tomorrows of my existence. I knew as a child that I would be beautiful, but I soon found that all beauty is ephemeral, and that perfection soon ripens to decay. No matter how earnestly I tried to avoid the unpleasant passages of life's poem I knew that they were waiting for me just around the corners of tomorrow.

"In addition to that, I love this country of ours. Of course, I know its imperfections, its greed, racketeers, political scandals, marital failures, but it is a wonderful country, and I love it. I could not think of its being conquered by Russia, and when you showed me the bottles, I thought I saw my chance. You were looking at my pendant, the new plaything you had given me, and then I remembered your saying that the new medicine looked and tasted like water, so, while you were looking at the pendant on the woman you wanted to buy, as you would a plaything, I shifted the bottles on the table, and, Oh! don't you see the humor in it all? You have the water in your pocket and we, each of us, have one half a bottle of the drug within us. I think it is working on me already, because for the first time in my life I do not fear tomorrow; I have a peculiar sensation, a most startling, odd sensation, and that feeling seems to tell me that there will be no more tomorrows in my life."

"Nonsense!" I cried. "You just think you shifted the bottles. You wouldn't do a thing like that. You couldn't! You are just teasing me."

"Think so?" she jeered. "Then how about this? I'll marry you tomorrow."

And before I realized it I had said it. I tried to choke it back. Even went so far as to raise my hand to cover my mouth but it was too late. I said it and I knew that it was true.

"But we shall have no tomorrows," I gasped, and hated myself for the admitting of it.

Well, it was done and could not be undone. Eleven in the evening and the three men to meet at twelve! But twelve would be the beginning of a tomorrow; so, I could never meet them. I had a little money, a few thousand left out of the advance. What could I tell them? The truth?

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Would they believe it? How could I show them that even in my horrible condition I was proving to them that my invention was a success?

No doubt as to what would happen! They would kill me! That in itself would not be so bad, but how about Leonora? Even in spite of her treachery to me, I still loved her, was still insanely in love with her. Well, there was only one thing to do and that was to discover a cure. It seemed that somewhere, in the realm of medical skill, there should be something that would bring me back my tomorrows.

First, I thought of psychoanalysis. Then of hypnotism. Perhaps a long period of anaesthesia would enable me to turn the trick. All this came to my mind as I sat silently across the table from Leonora, and then, despairingly, I left her. She laughed at me as I left the alcove.

"Goodbye," she jeered. "I will see you tomorrow."

I went back to my rooms. Fortunately, the Russians did not know where they were. No one did. I worked in the laboratory, and I had told Twenty-one where that was, but none of my assistants knew where I slept. So, in those rooms I felt safe. Arriving there, sleep overcame me. Waking, there came the thought that it all had been a horrible dream, a fantasy, born of indigestion, a corrosive nightmare. Hastily the bottle in my vest pocket was analyzed, and then came the certainty—it was water. For me there were no more tomorrows. I was simply in a perpetual today.

Nine that morning found me in the office of a great psychoanalyst, a healer of souls, a prober of the subconscious. I told him my problem. He smiled at me kindly, assured me that my fears were groundless and suggested a course of treatment.

"I can begin on your case tomorrow," he said, with a smile.

"That statement in itself is sufficient to show me that I can expect no help from you," I cried in despair. "How can you start treating me tomorrow, when that day will never come?"

So, I paid him his bill and left the office.

I telephoned to the laboratory. Yes, there had been visitors there, just as I knew there would be, and they were hunting for me. Well, let them hunt! They never would come upon me unless I wanted them to.

A few hours later found me in the office of a celebrated hypnotist. That time I was not taking any chances on a specialist's misunderstanding me.

"I want you to give me a tomorrow," I began. "I am not hunting for a dozen or a thousand tomorrows; just one. If I can find myself in the dawn of just one tomorrow

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I will know that I am cured of my disease." And after a great deal of talking on my part I showed him just exactly what he could do for me.

"I am sure that I can help you," he assured me. "My plan is this. We will wait till nearly midnight and then I will hypnotize you. I will suggest to you that you revive your former personalities, go back into the age of the dawn-man, the Roman, the Englishman, the settler of America, the Revolutionary patriot and finally I will bring you back to today, but your mind will be flowing so fast that it cannot stop, and when I awaken you, your existence will already have gone forward into the future, and when that happens you will be cured."

"That sounds good, and what time shall I be here?"

"About eleven tonight."

"Then I will stay right in your office."

It was there that he directed me to look at the revolving light. He whispered into my drowsy ear. And crashing backward into the dead past I went, just as he said I would, back to the dawn man and the sabertoothed tiger, back to the building of the first wall around Rome. I saw and took part in a sea battle between the fleets of Rome and Carthage, and even as my ship sank I found myself with Columbus, sailing westward toward the fabled Indies. What was this new battle? Oh, Yes! I was with Washington at Germantown, and later charged with Picket through the blood-stained wheat field of Gettysburg, and now I was in New York in my laboratory, making devils' broth to sell to Russians, and then something snapped and I awoke, There was the hypnotist gazing anxiously at me.

"How do you feel?" he said.

"How should I feel?" I almost shouted.

"How far did you get in the dream?"

"Only to the events of today."

"But you have been almost dead for hours. I never was so alarmed. For hours you have scarcely breathed.

"But is this tomorrow?"

"No. This is not tomorrow. That will not be here for eighteen hours. This is just today."

In spite of my anger, I started to sob. Just another failure; but, at the same time, another proof that my drug was doing all that it claimed to do. I paid the man and slouched out of the office. Was I being followed on the street or was it just my jumpy nerves?

In a telephone pay-station I listened to Leonora. She was having the time of her life.

"How can I thank you for what you did for your sweetheart? And where have you been? I have been having a most wonderful time, one thrill after another, and never

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a care or a worry. Now that I am sure there will be no more tomorrows, I am getting an awful kick out of the todays of life. Why not join me? Come on! I know a new nightclub and we will simply kick the hours away to the latest jazz."

But somehow I could not look at it the way she wanted me to.

I lived on. That was the pitiful part of it. I ate and hid and tried to think; at times I slept from sheer exhaustion. But always I found myself in the todays of life. At last I sought the aid of a physician. He told me that I was living on my reserve strength.

"Unless you stop and rest, you are liable to collapse, and perhaps die. You must take better care of yourself," he advised.

"Just when do you think I shall die?" I whispered.

"Anytime. Perhaps during the next week, and it may be tomorrow."

"Then I shall live on forever," I told him. "Doctor tell me honestly. Did you ever know of a case like mine? Have you ever treated a man who has lost his tomorrows?"

It was interesting to see the way the man looked at me. He must have almost thought that I was insane. At least, he started to phone to the police, and that was a signal for me to rush out of the office. Police meant newspapers and reporters and notoriety. None of that for me.

But outside the office, right on the street, men closed around me and forced me into a waiting taxi. Once in there, I could easily tell what had happened. A large head, a blind face and another face, all nose, easily helped me to identify my traveling companions.

Later on they took me into a bare room in a third floor back tenement. Just a table and four chairs.

"You tried to goldbrick us!" accused Twenty-one.

"Took our gold and then endeavored to escape!" whined Forty-seven, and he almost sung a tune with those eight words, as he breathed them through his nose.

But Thirty-four simply started to take off his coat. He took off his coat and his vest and then his shirt. Fascinated, I looked at him undressing with his one capable arm. At last I saw the mystery of the blind man. The unusualness of it made me gasp. Twenty-one, who had been watching me closely, started to laugh as he explained it to me.

"Odd? Decidedly! Of course, he is blind, but that doesn't make any difference, because we bring his prey to him. His one long arm is weak, so much so that he uses it only for the nicer things in life, like eating and dressing. But look at that hand growing out of his right shoulder! That hand is un-

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usual. It has been pronounced as a real anomaly by some of our greatest anatomists. It is a hand without an arm, but it has muscles, the pectorals in front and the powerful back muscles posteriorly. Once that hand closes on a throat, it never lets go. During the Revolution dear old Thirty-four just sat in a chair and we brought him the nobility—and he did the rest—with their throats. Odd? But not so much so when you know his history. Before he was born his mother had to stand by while her husband was literally being torn to pieces by one of the Russians, who thought they were gods. So, poor old Thirty-four was born with only one arm, but, as you will soon find out, he has two hands, and one of them is very—yes wonderfully capable.

At that I looked at the hand closely. It was beginning to open and close as if practicing for the sonata, that was soon to play. For a minute I was sure that this was the end. In spite of myself, I trembled and a cold chill swept over me. I knew that I had lost Leonora forever. Then the big nose Forty-seven blurted out triumphantly,

"We are going to wait till tomorrow and then—you will die of air hunger."

At that I laughed. They looked at me in astonishment.

"Oh! This is too much," I gasped in my mirth. "Why, if you are going to wait till tomorrow, you will never be able to kill me. Don't you understand? The toxin was really a success. I tried it on myself! It worked. *YOU CANNOT KILL ME TOMORROW. FOR I HAVE NO TOMORROWS!*"

The End

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An out of the way planet called Gehenna (where Earth dumps its dead), an androgynous alien who looks like an overgrown millipede but answers to the name Queel, and an Earthman who looks like Tarzan but thinks like an alien. All of them the delightful ingredients in a first *story by a new writer whose light touch and sense of fun should help put an end—at least temporarily—to the old cry that what the field needs is some new blood and a little humor from time to time. Well, with Doris Piserchia at the typewriter, that's what we'll be looking for from now on.*

ROCKET TO GEHENNA

By DORIS PISERCHIA

NOTE: Early in the spring of 2200, while doing a little office house cleaning, Earth's new commissioner of body disposal came across the following correspondence crammed into the back of a dusty old file cabinet:

Sept. 25, 2066

Dear Commissioner of Body Disposal,

We thought we would *never* find Earth! We've been overshooting it for years. There are just too many planets in this galaxy. But now that we've finally contacted you, we'll make our request brief and to

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the point. Would you kindly stop dumping the bodies of your deceased citizens on our planet?

Davey and Queel

Oct. 1, 2066

Dear Commissioner of Body Disposal,

In spite of our letter of several of your days ago, you're still using our home as a graveyard. Don't you know this is a violation of private property rights? Also, you're making the place obnoxious. We've been using Flaming Gorge as a depository, and it does the job fairly well, but there is a limit to any hole, you know, not to mention the fact that it's difficult to concentrate on anything when someone is liable to drop in your lap at any moment.

According to *Galactic Law* (Article 209, p. 5,102), any planet that is not declared a colony by the free world of Earth is up for grabs and can be claimed by any Genus Homo as his personal property. Since I (Davey) am the only human being living on the planet that you and your neighbors refer to as Gehenna, and since Earth has not declared it a colony, I am its legal owner.

Would you please find some place else to put your dead?

Davey and Queel

Southside Detective Agency
Detroit, Michigan
Oct. 9, 2066

Bradley Clark
Body Disposal Center
Detroit, Michigan

Mr. Clark:

I regret to report that my man failed to discover who is leaving letters on your desk after hours. Agent Holmes concealed himself in your office for seven nights, but all he received for his efforts was strained eyeballs.

Let me remind you that this agency has a lengthy backlog of potential customers with legitimate problems, and we don't appreciate being retained to chase after imaginary burglars.

In view of the fact that you hold a position of some prominence in our society, I refrain from telling you my true feelings regarding this matter. Rather, I refer you and your troubles to Dr. Harold J.

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Bond of the Universal Institute of Psychiatrics.

Joseph Swan
Director

Oct. 12, 2066

Dear Commissioner of Body Disposal,

The situation is aggravating. We had hoped to clear it up without resorting to unneighborly measures, but you keep ignoring our letters, so we've little choice. Since Queel and I don't relish this relocating process of picking bodies out of the air and putting them in the Flaming Gorge, we've decided to *return* them to you. Unless we receive some reassuring word within the week, we intend to carry out our decision.

Please leave all correspondence to us on your desk, and we'll pick it up at the first opportunity.

Davey and Queel

Oct. 13, 2066

To Some Nut:

I don't know how you're getting in here, but I want to remind you, in controlled tones, that breaking and entering is a felony. If you persist in burglarizing this establishment and leaving succinct samples of insanity on my desk, I'm going to take legal action. I have far more urgent things to do than spend my time reading letters from a screwball.

For your sadly lacking supply of information, a detailed survey of the planet Gehenna was taken twenty years ago, and it was infallibly reported to be devoid of life, human and animal. Also, as I good and well know *you* know, Gehenna is far out of the way of ordinary space paths. That's why it was chosen as Earth's cemetery, and *that* is the reason why it has not been declared a colony. Only an idiot would set up housekeeping there, and although you fit the description, *I* do not, which means it's time you cut out the malarky and slink back to whatever institution you escaped from. However, just to titillate your peculiar sense of humor, I reasonably advise that if the bodies are getting in your hair by all means send them back.

Brad Clark

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205 Oak Avenue
Trenton, New Jersey
Oct. 17, 2066

Bradley Clark
Body Disposal Center
Detroit, Michigan

Sir?

Last week I sent you a check for $50. I expected that the money would be used to secure my mother-in-law (whom I shipped to you by express) a berth on the rocket to Gehenna.

This morning I looked out my bedroom window and discovered her lying in the back yard. If this is your idea of a practical joke, let me assure you that I didn't laugh.

Oh, I could kill you . . . My wife thinks *I* did it.

John Smith

Jeremiah Storm
Medium & Clairvoyant
41 Brown Road
Devonshire, England
17 October 2066

Bradley Clark
Body Disposal Center
Detroit, Michigan

Listen Bub,

I run a respectable business here, or I did until last night. Your little joke cost me plenty. I had five faithful customers when it happened, all gentle ladies of extremely sensitive natures. We were doing fine and were quite content with moans and heavy breathing, and then comes your idea of fun. In all my years of experience, I've never seen anything to compare with last night's spectacle. Those five men sailed in through the window like kites in a calm wind and floated down on the table, right under their poor widows' noses.

I can't figure out how you did it. I've tried the same thing myself, many times, and it never worked. But you're going to be sorry. Not only have you wrecked my business, you've wrecked me. I can't sleep.

I'm going to sue the living hell out of you!

Jeremiah Storm

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Society of Advocates of Immaterialism
New York, New York
Oct. 17, 2066

Bradley Clark
Body Disposal Center
Detroit, Michigan

Mr. Clark:

YOU ATHEIST!

Jane Foster
Secretary

Office of Secretary of Defense
White House
Oct. 17, 2066

President of the United World
White House

Mr. President:

Re your order G-106, dated 171300Z Oct., '66, I have dispatched Galactic Guard troops to every major city in the globe with instructions to prevent looting, rioting, and other criminal acts. I've also contacted Bradley Clark, Commissioner of Body Disposal. His statement was hysterical, incoherent, and unaccreditable as it more or less boiled down to a ludicrous insistence that an unidentified object called Queel and a human castaway on Gehenna are responsible for everything.

We have every available scientist working on the problem, and I can confidently assure you it will be explained and done with in a matter of hours.

Radar stations report no unidentified spacecraft in the solar system. Reports from all other inhabited sectors of the galaxy are also negative.

As of this moment, there's no reason to suspect that the phenomena lie outside the realm of psychology. Harold J. Bond, directing Psychiatrist at Universal Institute, New York City, has suggested than an alien spore may have penetrated our atmosphere and may be giving rise to a temporary global psychosis. The theory makes remarkable sense when one considers any alternative. For the good of all concerned, I propose that we tentatively accept

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Bond's hypothesis as fact and broadcast it on all available frequencies along with the assurance that there's nothing to worry about.

Cecil Gordon
Defense Secretary

Copies to: All White House Offices
Comm. of Body Disposal
F.B.I.

Oct. 19, 2066

Dear Commissioner of Body Disposal,

If you will check in your back records, you'll find that a woman named Mommy was shipped to Gehenna several years ago. I sneaked on the rocket and went with her. Queel was enjoying a daily constitutional just off Gehenna when the pilot ejected me and Mommy into space. Quick as a wink, he-she picked up my cellular activity with electronic feelers and tucked me into his-her incubator.

Queel buried Mommy on Gehenna by a little flower grove and then explained to me that I now had a new Mommy and that if I wanted to grow up to be a big whatever I was, I'd have to mind.

I remember how I disliked sleeping in my own bed. The incubator was the only thing I had to remind me of my other home and my warm Mommy. But there was always Queel. He-she has been a perfect baby sitter. Whenever I cried, he-she took me on long trips and showed me all the stars and planets in the galaxies. He-she says they're zoos.

The mention of my companion brings up a controversial point. He-she was highly incensed by your remark that Gehenna was reported to be devoid of life, human and animal. He-she is under the impression that you don't believe a being is a being unless he's either of the two, and you really can't blame Queel for feeling slurred when you consider the fact that he-she is an organic-inorganic life form. By much persuasion, I convince him-her that you are an extremely ignorant person and shouldn't be held accountable for every word you write.

But all this is beside my main point. Queel thinks I'd be happier if I had a family, but if I recall my infancy on Earth correctly, I can't have one without a wife. This is my main reason for writing this letter. Would you be so kind as to procure a female for me for

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the above-mentioned purpose? I would prefer a young, healthy one as Gehenna is still a relatively new frontier.

Davey

P.S. I hope the bodies haven't inconvenienced you.

Department of Sanitation
Detroit, Michigan
Oct. 19, 2066

Bradley Clark
Body Disposal Center
Detroit, Michigan

Mr. Clark:

My God, what am I going to do? They're in every street, alley, patio, vehicle, garbage can, and chimney. They dangle from roofs, TV antennae, telephone poles, electric wires, and radio towers. I've heard of mop-ups, but this is ridiculous!

Just what do you expect of my men, that is, if I still have any men? They're *all* quitting!

I ask you—reasonably, calmly, patiently, insanely, and at my wit's end—what am I going to do?

Paul Mason
Director

Oct. 19, 2066

Dear . . . uh . . . Davey,

I stayed here last night and watched for you, but I don't know whether I saw you or not. At about two minutes to twelve the office lit up like a church, and a strong wind knocked me off my chair. Was that you?

Considering what is going on in the streets, I'm forced to concede that you are not of Earth and that you do live on Gehenna when you aren't hiding in the woodwork of this office. It was clever of you and Queel to manage to send the deceased back to their relatives, but I'm of the opinion that their reception would have been less emotional had they arrived on the doorsteps of strangers. If I had the time, I'd wonder how you and he-she accomplished it, but I'm facing 30,000,000 lawsuits plus unveiled threats from the F.B.I.

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and the C.I.A., and can't be bothered with minutiae.

About the matter of a wife . . . I find it difficult to imagine that I could persuade any woman in her right mind to establish residence on Gehenna. Surely you must appreciate my point. If you put your mind to it, you may comprehend the fact that such a step for any human female would be redundant anyway since you've very neatly created a hell right here.

If you care to present yourself in my office, preferably during daylight hours, you'll find me a curious but not unsympathetic confidant. I don't intend to divulge the contents of our correspondence as my pitiful ventures in that direction proved to be embarrassing. I beg you to stop this shuffling of bodies. Couldn't you and Queel send them to some other planet, perhaps one in another galaxy?

I'm anxiously awaiting your reply.

Brad Clark

Oct. 20, 2066

Dear Brad,

As a point of information, I wouldn't come at all if we knew how to send letters by think waves. Right now, they're too small for us to manage. The trip to Earth takes little less than a second, which puts me in your office shortly before midnight, and your artificial lights are sufficient to allow me to get underway again almost instantaneously. So you see, I'm not hiding in the woodwork. By the time you read this I will have been back on Gehenna several hours. As I'm very busy learning a million languages and cultures, I can't spare the time for a long visit.

I spoke to Queel about the bodies. He-she is considering your proposal.

I'm sorry you can't get me a wife. Queel assures me that I need one to improve my humor. Since you insisted that you were unable to help me out, I appeared there today during your daylight hours and looked around for myself, and I believe that the female who works in your office will do. She is young enough, and there's something about her bonework that I admire. You don't have to worry about my problem anymore.

Davey

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Dear Brad,

HELP!

Pat

Oct. 21, 2066

Dear Davey,

Dammit, man, you can't have Pat! She happens to be my fiancee! Bring her back at once!

Brad

President of the United World
White House
Oct. 21, 2066

Bradley Clark
Body Disposal Center
Detroit, Michigan

Mr. Clark:

I have called your office, your apartment, your club, and every beer joint in town, but so far I've been unable to locate you. Far from surprising me, the fact that you're hiding out only serves to whet my suspicion that you're a rat deserting a sinking ship. You can forget that we were roommates in dear old Alma Mater, and you're strongly advised to ignore the fact that we once went on panty raids together. Past friendship has nothing to do with the matter at hand. In short, I order you to stop whatever it is that you're doing and to do whatever it is that you're not doing.

I always marked you as a man of great potential, but I realize my estimate of you was woefully inadequate. If I didn't know from personal experience that you're totally indifferent to politics or power for its own sake, I'd entertain the possibility that you're out to get me. At the moment. I'm probably the only individual in the universe who doesn't believe you've conspired with enemy agents to destroy the status-quo.

I am surrounded by fools—live ones.

I don't have a theory concerning the present world situation. In my opinion, anyone who has is out of his mind.

Do you realize what is being done to my public image? Don't

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snort! This is serious! If someone doesn't get us out of this mess, I won't be able to get a job washing windows after the next election, which means *you* won't even find a job shining window washers' shoes. Do I make myself clear? Do something, anything, except what you're already doing, whatever that is.

Clinton Lee Sankov
President

Oct. 24, 2066

Dear Brad,

I apologize for not having written but as I mentioned before, I'm very busy. Queel is experimenting with your idea about the bodies. He-she has selected a fine asteroid in a distant galaxy, but in attempting the transfer from Earth, he-she has run into a snag concerning the maintenance of steady contact with the bodies. I expect there's considerable flying around down there. I hope it hasn't been a nuisance to your citizens, but don't worry, Queel is on the right track and will soon have the whole thing cleared up.

The female called Pat is of a snappish, trembly nature and treats Queel as if he-she were a monster. She keeps insisting that I return her to Earth, but I remember how Mommy always said that women didn't know their own minds, so I pay no attention to her. She is quite ignorant of family matters, but she's durable and strong of structure and I've decided to keep her. I'm sure you can get yourself another fiancee. I hope you have a good family, which brings up the main point of this letter. Queel is expert at interpreting your law and language books but has bogged down on the subject of human procreation. He-she has digested some 5,000 volumes from your libraries but has yet to discover a single one that gets right down to the situation. All this consumption of paper is extremely exhausting to Queel. Personally, I don't see what anatomy has to do with it. Everybody knows human beings are all made alike, but would you do me the favor of telling me how we manage to have babies? It would save Queel and me a lot of work.

Davey

Dear Brad,

For heaven's sake, don't tell him!

Pat

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Oct. 26, 2066

Dear Brad,

I'm sorry you don't know how either, but I've been thinking about those early years of mine when I lived on Earth with Mommy, and I believe I've remembered what it is I need. Would you please get me a stork? No, make that five storks.

Didn't I assure you that Queel would clear up your body problem? They're flying past here at a terrific rate.

Davey

Oct. 29, 2066

Dear Brad,

My throat feels better now that I'm not screaming all the time, but I'll confess that I still faint once in a while whenever Queel gets too close. He-she looks like an overgrown millipede clad in steel armor, about twenty feet of writhing, clanking awfulness. No wonder the survey team never found him-her. His-her favorite hangout is underground. He-she's in the process of multiplying. Very nauseating. I understand he . . . oh, heck . . . *it* has been at it for thirty years. It's some sort of spacecomber from a galaxy about a billion light-years away, and it was flying around just off Gehenna when it suddenly (this kills me) found itself 'with child'; so it grounded here to wait out the happy event. Can't you just hear it? The patter of a hundred little feet, I mean. Don't ask me to explain the he-she side of its nature. I listened to Davey talk on the subject for about an hour, and I concluded that either Queel's true nature or Davey's interpretation of sex is incomprehensible.

It's been filching a lot of stuff out of Earth's libraries (good riddance, I say) and has been teaching it to Davey. Let me tell you, kindergarten is a hair-raising something to watch. Queel wraps its legs around Davey and then they sort of rub noses while Queel transfers its thoughts to Davey's mind.

I'm getting a little instruction myself this evening from Davey. He's teaching me how to travel on a thought line. Sometimes I feel as if I'm trying to slither through my shoes, but Davey says I'm doing great for an Earthling. There are moments when I think he forgets what he is. Anyhow, believe it or not, I went through a mountain yesterday. You have to be careful to go all at once, otherwise you might be lacking something vital when you're finished—like a head or an arm or what you had for breakfast.

Davey's building an aviary. I can't understand his sudden passion

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for birds. The cage he's preparing looks as if it would hold an ostrich, but the biggest bird here is about the size of a chicken. (?)

The place was a mess when I first saw it, but I've prettied it up a bit and since there are plenty of trees, I coaxed Davey to start building a house. I've discovered that I'm handy with fibers, so now we have curtains and I'm making Davey a decent pair of pants. I wear a fiber sack so he won't notice that we do have our differences.

Pat

Office of Secretary of Defense
White House
Oct. 29, 2066

Bradley Clark
Body Disposal Center
Detroit, Michigan

Mr. Clark:

If you've been listening to news broadcasts lately, you're aware that McKinley Shaw, Earth's representative to the United Worlds conferences, passed away. Since he was a man of influence and well thought of by the masses, his body was being prepared to lie in state for three days to afford the public an opportunity for one last farewell.

The purpose of this message is to inquire as to just what in hell you have done with him. The orderlies in charge of his preparation claim that someone stole him out the window. I know it was you! I'm aware of all your indecencies, but I find it incredible to discover that you've descended to body snatching. Haven't you enough corpses yet for that monster everyone says you're making?

You would be rotting in jail except for the fact that the executive branch has become obsessed with astrology and soothsaying.

I was granted a private interview with the President, but when I demanded your incarceration, he only shook his head and mumbled something about what a mediocre shoe shine boy somebody was going to make. If you have any reason left, you'll not derive any encouragement from our president's temporary preoccupation with vocational guidance. Just be assured that I want McKinley Shaw back, and I want him immediately!

Cecil Gordon

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Oct. 30, 2066

Dear Pat,

I was glad to learn those fiends haven't harmed you, but I'm a little confused by the tone of your letter. You mustn't get the idea that you're permanently stuck on Gehenna. Have faith in me and don't become despondent. I intend to get you out of there. Now that the bodies are "in flight," so to speak, I've summoned up enough courage to sneak back to my job. There are six policemen on every floor of the building, but I don't know if they're keeping watch for irate citizens or keeping watch on me.

The government has ordered the hearse jockies back to work, so I tried to hire one to land on Gehenna to pick you up. Unfortunately, this sort of thing isn't mentioned in their contract, and my request was met with profanity. The men are sitting on their imaginations with nothing to do. What is that insane alien doing up there? I can see it took care of our excess baggage, but surely it hasn't discovered the secret of immortality. In other words, although there are thousands of people still dying in the world, no one has any idea where they are, no one but me, that is. My desk is littered with letters from people who are calling me a ghoul.

In its enthusiasm, Queel took away McKinley Shaw at an inopportune time. He was being prepared to lie in state. Please, Pat, get them to send him back to Defense Secretary Cecil Gordon, or my head is going to fall.

Love,
Brad

Oct. 31, 2066

Dear Brad,

Davey told me about the stork. For some silly reason, I sat down and cried.

I appreciate your predicament, and I'm struggling with the problem of convincing Queel not to pluck up people the instant they die.

McKinley Shaw is on his way back. I tried to talk Queel into aiming Shaw for Gordon's doorstep, but he-she is obsessed with the notion that we humans can't see an object unless it's sitting on us. Since it's after midnight there and Gordon is probably asleep, he may not discover that he has a bed partner until morning.

It would be nice if you could get the government to choose another planet as a cemetery so that we could forget about bodies and concentrate on our own business. Earth made a mistake when she

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failed to colonize this little world. The crew who declared it unfit must have been retarded because Gehenna is teeming with small life, and the soil is perfect for farming. We have several lakes and two small oceans, and the mountains and natural rock formations are breathtaking. It isn't a bit like Earth. For instance, I can walk for miles without ever seeing a smokestack, a housing development, or a neighborhood gang looking for someone to beat up. I don't have to think about the Bureau of Internal Revenue, charity drives, or next month's bills. My stay on Gehenna is turning out to be a beautiful vacation I'll remember all my life.

Tonight Davey and I are going to watch the moonrise. It's a lovely sight to see.

Pat

Nov. 1, 2066

Dear Pat,

If you can travel on a . . . uh . . . thought line, why don't you come home? I miss you horribly. I've found a sweet little house that I know you'll just love, and it's absolutely desperate for furniture. Think of all the fun it'll be shopping. We can get married right away!

Be careful and don't let this pity thing go too far. Everyone feels sympathy for orphans, but when you remember that Davey hasn't actually been alone on that planet, then you can't really feel too sorry for him. Why, Queel sounds like a wonderful companion. Just stiffen your backbone, and tell Davey you can't stay away from your home and friends any longer. Tell him you have to get back to your job. (This is absolute fact since I can't function without a secretary, and nobody wants to work for me.) He'll take it like a man. After all, he has been around.

By the way, what does he look like?

Love,
Brad

Dear Brad,

TARZAN.

Nov. 3, 2066

Dear Pat,

Oh, well. But just remember that a good looking set of muscles

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isn't everything. Brains are important too. He can't have many if he goes galloping all over galaxies on no more than an idea. And he's so ignorant of the simpler things. I expect it must be pretty boring for a girl to meet a man who doesn't even know she's a girl. I mean . . . well . . . you know what I mean? What fun could that be?

Remember how much you enjoy the first snowfalls of the season here? It's particularly beautiful today because we had five inches of the softest down, and the smog scarcely discolored it at all. The streets are gay with Thanksgiving decorations, and I've promised you a twenty-pound turkey for your wedding dinner. Yum, yum! Just as soon as you come home, I'm taking two weeks off, and we're going to spend the entire time doing all the things you like. We'll have a wonderful holiday.

Love,
Brad

Nov. 4, 2066

Dear Brad,

My humor has certainly improved, which is only additional evidence of the wisdom of Queel. Pat is a good wife. She's a very nice kind of human being too, although standing close to her makes me nervous. It's hard to put my finger on them, but there are differences between us. For one thing, she doesn't have hair on her chin like me, which I like, and for another, she walks in an odd but interesting way. She says she wished I'd hurry up and stop asking her questions about Earth language and customs as she has other subjects to teach me.

She's writing a letter that she wants me to deliver to you, but she keeps tearing the thing up and starting all over again. I'll deliver it whenever she gets it done.

Davey

Nov. 15, 2066

Dear Kids,

Never mind the letter. I eventually learn when I'm licked. My congratulations on your discovery of each other.

Here is my new address in case you ever want to get in touch with me: Downy Farms, Kansas City, Kansas.

I'm sneaking out of town, changing my name, and taking up a new profession—poultry farming. There's something comforting about the idea of watching somebody else lay the eggs.

Love,
Brad

The End

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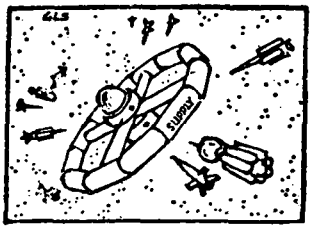

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Jan Benes, "miniaturization" scientist, has certain information that may save the world. Unfortunately he also has a potentially fatal bloodclot on the brain.

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$70,000.00 IN CASH PRIZES!

"Your $1,200.00 check arrived this morning by Special Delivery. Thanks ever so much for your telephone call and prompt payment. It still doesn't seem possible. It's been a great thrill."

That's the way Emory Mead of Albany, N. Y., just one of our many big winners, reacted to receiving his cash prize. *Dozens of men and women of all ages have cashed in as* members of our exciting PUZZLE LOVERS CLUB.

Our Club winners got their cash awards for solving puzzles in their leisure time. Our Club also has awarded huge prizes for many other kinds of contests.

We've awarded cash in hundred-and-thousand-dollar units to retirees, sewing women, farmers, salesmen, war veterans, office workers, clerks, secretaries — people who never before dreamed of having the kind of money that movie stars make.

This announcement is an invitation to you, as a reader of this publication, to find out for yourself if you have the talent to win up to $70,000.00 in cash. If you are over 18 and like to play word games of any kind, the information below may lead you to thousands of dollars in extra cash that you may use as you wish.

Mrs. H. C. Despain, Houston, Tex., won $1,000.00 in cash in one month.

Ray Smith, Sacramento, Calif., won nearly $1,000.00 in Club contests.

Mrs. Florence Humphrey, Cincinnati, won $500.00 on just one puzzle.

WIN CASH MAIL NOW

YOU Can WIN Each Month!

Members of our Club win cash prizes at home, just by solving puzzles and entering Club contests. They turn an educational and enjoyable hobby into pure profit. **You can too!**

Your chief advantage in contests sponsored by our PUZZLE LOVERS CLUB is that you have only limited competition. Only members of the Club may compete and win.

In 1963 we offered our members $35,000.00. We actually paid out more cash than we said we would—$35,511.25, to be exact. In 1964, we again offered $35,000.00. Again, we paid out more than we promised—$40,778.11. And now we're offering our members $70,000.00 in cash prizes. Most contest groups offer about $4,500 or $5,000 a year. **Our Club gives you the opportunity to win double that every month!**

As a member of our Club you will be eligible to enter every cash prize contest we sponsor and you'll get at least four new contests each month. You'll have three weeks to solve each set of contests. One week after the deadline, you'll receive a new copy of our **Puzzle Lovers Newspaper** with names and addresses of all winners, correct solutions, and your new puzzle contests. When YOU win, you receive your prize within two weeks.

IT COSTS YOU NOTHING TO TRY OUR CONTESTS AND SEE IF YOU HAVE THE TALENT TO WIN

The coupon below will bring you, absolutely FREE, a sample copy of our **Puzzle Lovers Newspaper,** the only newspaper in the world exclusively devoted to contests (and it's published for members only). When your free copy of our newspaper arrives, sit down in a quiet place and read about our winners, our prizes, our contests. Try our stimulating word games to see if you can do them. You are under no obligation to enter our contests. If you do decide to go after our cash, there are no boxtops, no jingles to complete, nothing to buy.

Clip the coupon now and please be sure to print your name and address clearly. Then read about $1,000.00 winners like Mrs. Belle Smith of Yakima, Wash. Discover how hundreds of other members cashed in just by doing our puzzles in their spare time. Find out all about this exciting and profitable hobby now. You may receive your first big prize in a few weeks.

AFFIX THIS COUPON TO POSTCARD FOR FAST HANDLING OR MAIL IN ENVELOPE.

PUZZLE LOVERS CLUB **Box 2, Prince Street Station, New York City 10012**

Gentlemen,

Send me a free copy of your newspaper plus all details on your cash prize contests. I am under absolutely no obligation to pay anything. If I join the Club I may compete for all prizes and spend the cash I win any way I want.

Name_____

Address_____

City_____

State_____ Zip_____

2-1

ENJOY YOURSELF IN YOUR OWN HOME AND WIN EXTRA CASH!

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- ☐ General Accounting
- ☐ Income Tax
- ☐ Accounting Fundamentals
- ☐ Auditing
- ☐ Controllership
- ☐ CPA Training
- ☐ Modern Bookkeeping

BUSINESS MANAGEMENT
- ☐ Complete Business Management
- ☐ Credit and Collections
- ☐ Office Management
- ☐ Personnel Management
- ☐ Business Correspondence

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- ☐ Business Law
- ☐ Insurance Law
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SALESMANSHIP
- ☐ Sales Management
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- ☐ Basic Drafting
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- ☐ Electrical Drafting
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- ☐ Bookkeeping
- ☐ Real Estate

Name ..... Age .....

Address ..... County .....

City & State ..... Zip No. .....

Occupation ..... Working Hours .... A.M. .... P.M.

322

If you had mailed this coupon a year ago, your salary could be way up too!

WHY NOT MAIL IT TODAY?

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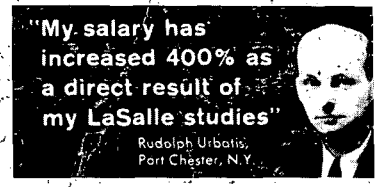

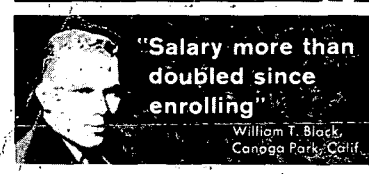

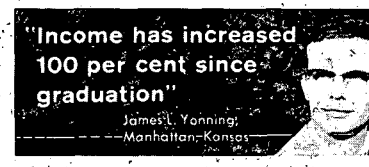

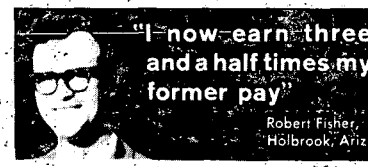

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